What Makes a Successful Online Learner?

The many advantages of online learning include flexibility and convenience. But online learning is a lot more challenging than it may seem.

Are you considering taking some or all of your courses online? Good for you!

But first, make sure you're ready to succeed. Online learning can sound so wonderful that some students start online courses with an unrealistic vision. In reality, online courses generally require just as much, if not more, time and energy as traditional classroom courses. Also, online learning requires specific computer skills and learning strategies in order to succeed.

To see if you're ready, see how many items you can check off on the following checklist:

1. Persistence

Persistence is perhaps the biggest key to success in online learning. Students who succeed in online learning are those who are willing to tolerate technical difficulties, seek help when needed, work daily on every class, and persist through challenges.

- When you run into a challenge, keep trying and ask for help.
- Set up a manageable study schedule for yourself and stick to it. Students who succeed are those who log in and make progress every day— even after the novelty of going to school online starts to wear off!

2. Effective time-management skills

You must be able to manage your time well. Most courses are not taught in real time and there are no set times for classes.

This flexibility is one of the great benefits of online learning. However, it can also be a drawback for a student who procrastinates, is unable to stick to a routine study schedule, or is not able to independently complete assignments without daily reminders from a teacher.

Effective time-management skills don't just happen. They have to be learned. Once you learn them, they will benefit you throughout your life. Follow this list of tips to develop your own good time-management skills:

- Review the syllabus for each of your courses and develop a long-term plan for completing your major assignments.
- Make a daily "To Do" list and have fun checking things off the list as you complete them.

It takes time to develop good habits, but over time, you'll start to enjoy the satisfaction that comes from being well-organized and accomplishing important tasks.

3. Effective and appropriate communication skills

Communication skills are very important in online learning because students have to be willing to seek help when they need it. Teachers are very willing to help students, but they are unable to pick up on non-verbal cues, such as a look of confusion on a student's face. Follow these tips:

Use the tools provided by the school to communicate with your teachers. Many online schools and programs provide several ways for students and parents to communicate with teachers and staff, including email, discussion groups, chat room office hours, cell phones, and even text messaging. Teachers and staff are glad to take questions from students and want to help you to succeed in your classes. At first it may feel awkward to talk to your teachers this way, but don't worry. If your teacher has chat room or cell phone office hours, don't be shy about using those tools to communicate with your teacher.

Use appropriate style and language for school. It's also important to understand appropriate communication for a school setting. When communicating with teachers and other staff members, you should write in full, grammatically correct sentences and with a respectful tone. Many students are used to a very informal style of writing in chat rooms, blogs, text messages, and so forth.

Online teachers are professionals and must be treated with respect and courtesy. Because of the distance, it's tempting for some students to say things out of anger, frustration, or even just to be friendly that they would never say to a teacher in person. Online teachers are professionals and must be treated with respect and courtesy.

4. Basic technical skills

The ability to create new documents, use a word processing program, navigate the Internet, and download software are some of the basic technical skills needed by online learners.

Most online schools have new student orientation programs to teach students how to use their learning management system and other online tools, but they typically don't teach the basics.

If you are unfamiliar with basic computer skills, you may want to find an online tutorial such as the one available through The Library Network (http://tech.tln.lib.mi.us/tutor/welcome.html).

You'll also want to check the online school's main website for their hardware and software requirements, to make sure your own computer meets those requirements.

5. Reading and writing skills

Reading and writing are the main ways you'll communicate in an online class. Although some hard copies of textbooks are available at school, you should be relatively comfortable reading extensive documents on a computer screen and typing without frustration.

If you type less than 25-30 words per minute, it may be worth completing a typing software program before beginning online classes.

Some tests and quizzes have multiple choice questions, but many of your assignments will involve writing short or long answers.

6. Motivation and independence

To be successful in online learning, a student has to want to be successful. Online learning requires independence, internal motivation, responsibility, and a certain level of maturity.

Have you given some thought to your own personal reasons for attending school?

Are you determined and self-motivated to succeed in school?

There are many worthwhile reasons to work hard in school. These might include a greater level of personal satisfaction with your future career, personal pride in your accomplishments, a wider range of opportunities available to you with higher education, and substantially higher lifetime earnings.

7. A good study environment

Another critical component of academic success is a good study environment.

- **Get some peace and quiet.** You will need a quiet place to work without distractions like television or siblings.
- **Avoid games.** Consider uninstalling any computer games to avoid temptation, or keep the games on a different computer in the house.
- **Turn off your cell phone.** Let friends and family members know the hours that you will be "at" school.
- **Beware surfing** the black hole of the Internet. It is easy to wander off through the Internet for much longer than planned.

- **Consider ergonomics.** Adjust the height of your chair, keyboard, and screen so that you are comfortable. Forearms and thighs should be level and parallel to the floor. Wrists should not be bent while typing.
- **Set up good lighting and comfortable seating.** Lighting in the room should be at least as bright as the computer screen to avoid eye strain.