Chapter 1

Heading Online for Your Education

In This Chapter

▶ Seeing what online education is all about

▶ Walking through the process of becoming an online student

▶ Finding out what it takes to succeed in online classes

▶ Looking at special populations that may benefit from online courses

*H*ello, and welcome to the world of online education. We are very excited that you picked up this book to help you understand online education and what it takes to succeed in the online classroom. In this book, we explore the ins and outs of online education. We share personal stories from both instructor and student perspectives as a way of helping you understand what is expected of students and the sometimes false expectations of new online students.

You may have some specific questions about online education. For example:

✔ What is online education, and how does it differ from the traditional face-to-face classroom?

✔ What institutions offer online programs/courses and how do I find them?

✔ What type of computer and technological skills do I need to take an online class?

✔ What kind of work will I be expected to do, how will I complete that work, and how will I be graded?

✔ What resources are available if I need help?

Our hope is that we have created a resource that answers these questions and more in order to help you succeed as an online student. In this chapter, you begin your journey into the virtual world of online education.

Examining the Characteristics and Advantages of Online Education

Online education is about connecting the student to educational materials by way of the Internet. Online education combines a student (you), a curriculum (determined by the school or instructor), and an Internet connection. In this section, we introduce a few traits and advantages of online education; we cover both topics in more detail in Chapter 2.

The nature of online education

The information for an online course and the way in which you prove that you are learning may vary widely. A few common formats include

✔ **Reading material, engaging in online discussions with your classmates, and then submitting papers or projects at the end of the term.** This is probably the most common design. You complete the work when it's convenient for you, but within the guidelines established by the instructor. For instance, if he says you need to post discussions by Monday at midnight, you can work through the weekend and get your ideas on the board before you begin your work week. These courses are often facilitated by an instructor (they're referred to as *instructor-led*) who not only shares his expertise in the field, but helps guide you through the entire online learning process.

✔ **Reading material and then taking a test.** This is our least favorite method, and many students find it horribly dull. However, for some subjects, you can zip through the basic background information quickly and move on. You typically have very little interaction with your peers. As a matter of fact, in some *self-paced* courses, you have no interaction with peers and little interaction with the instructor.

✔ **Reading materials, logging into a real-time Web conference, and listening to the instructor or interacting with peers.** You take a test or submit papers later to demonstrate your understanding. This synchronous (real-time) method of online education is becoming more popular, but it requires you to adjust your schedule to accommodate the class, just as you would a traditional class. These courses are also instructor-led, but sometimes include peer presentations as well.

REMEMBER

In Chapter 2 we provide more examples of how the nature of online education is unique. However, we want to emphasize an attitudinal shift in online education: The learner (you!) must assume responsibility for learning the material. There's no cyber-prof in the room to nag you or tell you when it's time to log

in. Of course, wonderfully encouraging and compassionate faculty want to see you succeed and communicate with you regularly to keep you engaged, but the nature of online education requires the student to take charge and complete the work.

So what kind of student thrives in this kind of educational landscape?

✔ **A student who needs flexibility in when courses are offered:** If you don't have a free moment until 11 p.m. because of competing life demands, but you really want to learn, an online course you can complete at 1 a.m. may work. (We hope you get to sleep in until later in the morning!)

✔ **A student who comfortably sets his own agenda and manages his time well:** If you're good at crafting a plan and sticking to it, online education may be for you. While the instructor may provide a schedule and deadlines for assignments, you have to work them into your lifestyle.

✔ **A student with strong reading and writing skills:** Because much of what you need to know comes through textbooks or Web pages, you need to be a decent reader prior to taking an online course. In addition, the way you show that you know the material requires writing summaries and short essays. Clear, concise written communication skills earn students A's.

✔ **A student who's comfortable with technology:** Later in this chapter we say more about this topic, but the bottom line is that an online course requires familiarity with your computer. This isn't the place to learn *about* the computer.

A few pros of online education

Online courses have been steadily growing in popularity for the last few years. Here are just a few reasons why online education is so popular:

✔ **You can work around your schedule.** Who isn't triple-scheduled these days with demands of work, family, and community? Few of us have large blocks of time available for classes, but we may have an hour here or there. With an online course, you can log in and work when it fits into your schedule. You may find that studying for an hour first thing in the morning or over your lunch break is just what you need to get you back into the academic groove.

✔ **You can save time and money by not having to commute to school.** Even if your local college is 5 miles from your home, the process of packing up your gear, getting to the school, finding parking, and walking to the classroom takes thirty minutes. Save the gas money and time, and study from home!

✔ **In some cases, courses are accelerated and you complete the degree or program sooner.** A mixed blessing, many online programs have accelerated a traditional semester-long course into eight weeks. While you may only take one course at a time (two per semester), these courses move fast! The good news is that these kinds of programs typically run year-round and get students through degrees and certificate programs faster than they would otherwise. (Flip to Chapter 4 for more information on accelerated classes.)

✔ **Some of the pettiness and bias in traditional classes gets left behind in the online world.** No one knows whether you are shy, speak with a lisp, or have multiple tattoos when you're an online student. What others care about are your ideas and how you communicate these ideas about the course material. Many students find this liberating.

Knowing the Technology and Computer Skills You Need to Succeed

Many non-traditional or adult students shy away from online education because they're afraid their computer skills aren't good enough or they worry that they need a state-of-the-art computer. Don't let these thoughts scare you away from reaching your academic goals. Most institutions provide technological support and detailed lists of hardware, software, and competency requirements. Family, friends, and your local library also can serve as great backups when technology breaks or your Internet access is lost.

Don't get us wrong though: A few minimum requirements must be met to adequately learn online. Chapter 3 describes the technology you need and all the skills necessary to be an online student. In short, students taking online courses should have access to the following basic hardware and software:

✔ A computer with monitor, keyboard, and mouse

✔ Access to a reliable Internet connection

✔ A Web browser (for example, Internet Explorer, FireFox, or Safari)

✔ A printer

✔ Speakers, microphone, or a headset with microphone (optional, but may be required by some programs)

✔ Word-processing software

✔ Presentation software such as PowerPoint or Keynote

Additionally, you should be able to handle the following basic tasks before taking an online course:

- Opening your Internet browser and navigating to a given Web-site address (URL)
- Sending and receiving e-mails with attachments
- Opening a word-processing application and formatting, saving, and retrieving documents
- Reading and scrolling Web pages efficiently
- Typing quickly and accurately
- Organizing folders on your computer's hard drive or an external flash drive
- Downloading and installing software
- Running virus protection software

Seeing How to Go About Becoming an Online Student

After you have an idea of what may be involved in online education, as well as the technological competencies you need, you can turn your attention to finding the right program and school and getting your seat in the class. You also need to know the process for applying to a school and how you can get ready for class. We introduce the basics in this section.

Finding available courses

We assume you know what you want to study — for instance, you know whether you want art history or business administration. That said, do you want to take a course or two, or do you need a degree or certificate? We ask this question because it influences how you go about finding an online course. Setting your sights on a degree means investing more time and money in the learning process. If you're like most people, the stakes seem a little higher when money is mentioned, and you want to make the best decision.

Here are a few possibilities, and you may want to explore all three:

- **If all you need is a course or two in one area, check with your local two-year school.** Many two-year colleges offer online courses at a fraction of the cost of traditional four-year institutions.

✔ **If you're looking for a graduate-level course in your professional area, go back to where you earned your undergraduate degree and see whether they offer online courses.** You already have a relationship with the institution, and you may find the application and admission processes are streamlined.

✔ **Use a standard search engine to explore the possibilities through major online institutions.** We list ten top online schools in Chapter 20. Chances are very good that one of them can serve your needs. Just be prepared to receive solicitations the minute you submit a Web-based form asking for more information!

Jump to Chapter 4 for a more detailed explanation of the process of finding the courses and programs available online.

Evaluating schools

REMEMBER

Regardless of whether you want one course or a degree program, you must select a school that is respected and accredited. Don't sink your money into a diploma mill that teaches nothing and wastes your time. In Chapter 5 we detail how to determine a school's accreditation, but we can tell you up front that *it should be obvious.* When you visit the Web site for the school or review its printed material, you should see accreditation credentials listed.

After accreditation, you may want to consider other factors when you evaluate online schools (see Chapter 5 for more details and lists of questions to ask academic advisors, instructors, and other students):

✔ **General style of the courses:** Are these self-paced courses where you read and take tests, or do they engage the learner in discussions and active participation? You need to find a course that meets your expectations of what learning should be ideally. Also, consider whether you will work on your own schedule or whether your courses are scheduled with real-time meetings conducted via Web conferencing.

✔ **Class size:** How many students does the school squeeze into the virtual classroom? If you're one of 20, that's a great ratio. If you're one of 50, expect the instructor to be harried and the quality of your interaction to be markedly different.

✔ **Completion and retention rates:** This is a very telling statistic. How many students actually complete the courses or degrees? If only 20 percent of starters get to the finish line, the courses may be poorly designed, too difficult, too boring . . . you get the picture. This is an area worth exploring with a counselor or advisor.

✔ **Faculty background and training:** Who teaches at this school? What kinds of credentials do they possess, including technology training? Surprisingly, you don't need to consider whether the faculty are full-time or part-time,

because many online faculty are actually subject-matter experts with impressive professional credentials in their disciplines. The most critical issue is whether they know what they're doing when teaching online.

✔ **Student support services available:** Who is going to help you get registered, select the right courses in the right sequence, figure out the technology, and so on? What if you need accommodation for a disability? Quality schools and programs address these student services from the beginning; you know you have a whole team behind you.

Applying to school and getting the money you need

If you're an adult learner, you may remember the lengthy college application process where you filled in forms, wrote an essay, took exams, and so on. Your high school guidance counselor probably walked you through the steps. Some of that process is the same online, just Web-based. Other processes are slightly different. For example, you may not need entrance exams like ACTs and SATs. Transcripts can be sent electronically.

Chapter 6 provides an overview of the whole process. It may surprise you that applying to an online school and then following through with registration still involves a guidance counselor of sorts. In the digital world, this usually involves continual communication with a representative from the school. For example, if you need to know more about a program, you may be asked to fill in a Web-based form. That form generates a phone call, and you quickly have a personal counselor or advisor working with you.

Not only do you have to think about the application process, but you also have to consider the cost of classes. College isn't cheap. However, just as you may consider financial aid for traditional courses, you should explore this area for online programs (see Chapter 6). Your financial options may include

✔ **Scholarships based on academics, demographics, or some other criterion.** These do not have to be paid back.

✔ **Grants awarded by the federal government based on financial need.** To qualify, you must first complete the same financial aid paperwork as all other students, available at `www.fafsa.ed.gov/`

✔ **Loans, either through the government or private lenders.** When you need to pay these back and at what interest rate depends on the lender.

REMEMBER

Are online courses less expensive than traditional on-ground courses? Yes, probably. Tuition may be the same, but you save money by not having to pay transportation costs. Other expenses, such as child care, may or may not affect you. For example, one parent may be able to study while children nap or

do their own homework; another may need childcare to keep a busy toddler occupied so he can focus on schoolwork.

TIP

If you study more than part-time at a regionally accredited institution that receives federal financial aid, you may be eligible for assistance. You have to be part of a degree or certificate program, however. Check with the school for the details of what may be available, as well as its process. This is where selecting a school with a full suite of student services pays off, literally.

Getting accepted and getting ready for class

After you've applied to an institution, your application and supplemental materials (transcripts, letters of reference, and personal statements) are reviewed by the institution. Of course, being the smarty that you are, you're accepted. You receive notice of your acceptance via e-mail; however, some institutions follow up with a more formal acceptance letter via standard U.S. mail. If for any reason you're not accepted, don't panic. Would-be students may not be accepted for any of several reasons, many of which are merely administrative. In Chapter 7 we discuss in more detail what to do once you're accepted and strategies for moving forward if your application is rejected.

Once you are accepted, you must enroll in courses. This process is also completed using the Web. Most institutions, even those teaching face-to-face, require students to log on to a Web site where they access the institution's course catalog and register for desired classes. These sites also provide you with a list of the required textbooks chosen for each class. If you don't know which class or classes you should take first or in what order you should take them, contact your academic advisor to work out these details.

Imagine that you're in between registering and actually starting class. What's left to do? Get oriented! Any decent school will provide you with an orientation experience. This may be a series of prerecorded tutorials to guide you through common technology processes. Or, it may be an invitation to attend a live Webinar to see and experience the same. Orientation in its simplest form may consist of you receiving a document with printed procedures. See Chapter 7 for full details.

Being a Star Student

After you register for classes, it's time to begin learning. This can be a little nerve-wracking, especially if you haven't been in school for awhile. However, like most things in life, a little preparation goes a long way. We help you with the basics in this section.

Making your way around your classroom

To really succeed in the online classroom, it helps to be prepared and take the necessary time to become familiar with your classroom. In many cases, institutions will even open your virtual classroom one or two days before classes officially begin. Be sure to take advantage of this opportunity by logging into your course and becoming familiar with the following aspects:

- ✔ General course structure
- ✔ Instructor announcements
- ✔ Instructor contact information
- ✔ Syllabus
- ✔ Calendar
- ✔ Course policies (including grading)

Flip to Chapter 8 for plenty of help with navigating your classroom.

Meeting the instructor, fellow students, and other important folks

You may think you're alone on your academic journey just because you're not physically in the same room or building as your instructor and classmates. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, some of our students have shared with us that they feel more connected to their online peers than they feel about the people they work with on a daily basis.

When taking online courses, you have a plethora of academic and technical support. Not only do you have your instructor and peers, but most institutions also connect you with academic advisors, technical support staff, guest speakers, and more. Check out Chapter 9 for more information on meeting all the people in and around your classroom.

If you ever do feel alone, don't hesitate to reach out. One way to stay connected to peers is to form a virtual study group that meets synchronously each week to discuss course content and upcoming assignments. You can do this through several free online tools like Google Chat or Skype.

Communicating with clarity

Though you may have opportunities to communicate with your instructors and peers via voice and/or video, most communication occurs in text. Therefore, communicating clearly, concisely, and respectfully in writing is important.

REMEMBER

Online courses utilize two standards of writing: formal and casual. Being able to follow the instructor's cue and write according to the standard of each particular course is important. For the most part, though, initial discussion posts and assignments use formal writing skills, whereas responses to peers, questions, and cyber-lounge posts are much more conversational.

Chapter 10 has full details on how to communicate clearly online.

Strengthening your study habits

With freedom comes responsibility. This statement couldn't be more true when it comes to developing good online study habits. As an online student, you have more freedom to choose the days and times that you study and complete assignments. This may sound great until family and friends want to go see the latest action film or your child begs you to read his favorite book for the 400th time. Developing a strict schedule for studying is important in order to keep up with readings and assignments.

Not only is it helpful to have a set schedule for studying, but you also need to establish efficient and effective study skills to maximize productivity. Looking for patterns within your course schedule, bookmarking important sites such as the library, and writing initial posts offline are all things you can do to use your time more efficiently. Flip to Chapter 11 for information on developing good study habits for online classes.

Working well in a group

Yep, you read correctly: group work. The fact that your instructor and peers aren't in your geographical location doesn't get you out of completing group assignments. Research shows that working in groups is tremendously beneficial, and being able to do it in an online setting takes skills, patience, and a lot of communication.

As with any group-based task, there are a few things you can do to help make group work more efficient and effective (as you find out in Chapter 12):

- Communicate as soon as possible and as often as possible.
- Summarize the project, and break it into manageable tasks.
- Delegate tasks to group members.
- Establish roles.
- Document progress.

REMEMBER

Most conflicts among group members are about one or more members of the group not doing their share. Documenting progress, or lack thereof, and keeping your instructor in the loop helps keep each member accountable and helps your instructor better facilitate conflict resolution when necessary.

Understanding online manners and ethics

One problem with communicating mostly by text is that anyone can misinterpret what is written. Therefore, you should keep humor to a minimum and avoid posting questionable content. You also need to recognize when and where to address individuals when problems do arise, including your instructor. For example, have you ever been in a face-to-face course when someone inappropriately questioned an instructor? In most cases the instructor wins, and the student ends up looking like a fool. The same is true in the online environment. If you need to question your instructor or another peer, post the question or concern privately and respectfully. In return, your instructor should also communicate concerns privately, along with other personal information such as your grade and assignment comments.

Part of being respectful and honest is posting original content and giving credit where credit is due when posting someone else's work. You should cite sources in formal assignments and in everything you post, e-mail, or present. If the idea isn't yours, cite it! If you have a question as to whether or not to cite something, or you're unfamiliar with the proper way to cite sources, ask your instructor or a librarian. We discuss this topic and others related to ethical behavior in Chapter 13.

WARNING!

Institutions often provide instructors with tools to check assignments for originality. These tools include comparing your assignments to a database of other assignments, Web content, and dissertations. Know your institution's guidelines for quoting/citing sources and developing original work. Some schools consider repurposing an assignment from one class for another plagiarism. The penalties for plagiarism can be quite severe, including removal from a program. Again, if you have a question about whether or not you can do something, ask. Don't assume.

Completing and turning in assignments

Some people believe that when you take an online class you simply read something and then take a test. This is partially true, but not as prevalent as you may think. Online instructors use a variety of assessment techniques to determine your level of understanding. As an online student, you may be

asked to answer questions about the readings, write an essay that analyzes and evaluates research, give an oral presentation, or create a project to share with the class. All of these are formal assessment techniques that require you to create something in a scholarly manner with proper citation and style formatting, depending on your instructor's directions.

How you submit each type of assignment can also differ. You may be asked to post your assignment in a public discussion forum for others to read and respond to. Alternately, you may be asked to submit your work via a private, virtual drop-box that only the instructor has access to. Other types of submission methods exist, too. The method for submission depends on the assignment, the purpose of the assignment, and your instructor's preference. Most online classes use a variety of submission methods.

We discuss how to finish and submit different types of assignments in detail in Chapter 14.

Transitioning after you're done with school

Many students go to school to either start a new career or to get a promotion at their current job upon graduating. Reminding yourself why you're going to school and tracking your progress can help you stay on track and prepare for that transition. Some degree programs require students to develop and maintain an electronic portfolio, also known as an ePortfolio. Think of this as an electronic resume that allows invited visitors to see your academic/work history, example assignments, and other pertinent information. Find out more about this and other topics related to transitioning in Chapter 15.

Looking at a Few Special Situations in Online Education

Online education opens access for learners who struggle in other contexts. In this section, we show how certain groups of students can be served through online courses. We begin with a discussion of where the youngest group, homeschooled and high school students, fit in, and then move to international students and those with disabilities.

Students in kindergarten through high school

Sometimes young learners want or need a different structure for learning than traditional schools offer. This includes kids who fall into these broad categories (among others):

- ✔ **Child actors and athletes who need to travel:** Whereas these kids used to have private tutors, now they can stay on top of coursework by enrolling in online schools.

- ✔ **Kids who live in areas where the schools can't offer advanced or specialized courses:** This describes a good number of rural communities. Online courses can fill in the gaps.

- ✔ **Learners hoping to avoid some of the high school influences of drugs or gangs:** Online students can focus on the academics.

- ✔ **Students who fail a class and jeopardize graduating on time:** The process of making up coursework used to mean summer school; now it includes online courses.

In many cases, states support online education for kids in kindergarten through high school via charter schools. Students within the state can take online courses to supplement or augment traditional curricula. Or, they may choose to forego traditional education altogether and take online courses exclusively. In Chapter 16, we discuss online education for kids of all ages, including how it differs from online education for adults, the variety of online schools available for kids, and the K-12 enrollment process.

Students from abroad

The Internet blurs geopolitical borders by allowing people to communicate with anyone around the globe. This benefits students from every country in the world as they enroll in online courses offered through schools based in the United States. The resulting international diversity enriches the academic experience for everyone involved.

Why would someone in another country want to take an online course from the United States? Here are just a few reasons:

- ✔ The United States has a reputation for excellence in higher education, but studying here is very expensive. Online education erases one of the expenses by removing the hassle of relocating to the United States.

✔ International students, like their U.S. counterparts, can balance work and family with school easier if they stay in their home countries with their established support systems (family, babysitters, church, and so forth). Earning the same degree online often means higher wages and improved lifestyles for international students, without the resulting costs of moving.

✔ Finally, international students don't have to apply for student visas if they study online. No political issues are involved!

WARNING!

One possible downside to studying online as an international student at an online school based in the United States may be the issue of English. Because online courses demand strong reading and writing skills, students whose first language isn't English may struggle with courses from a U.S.-based school.

We talk about online education for students outside the United States in detail in Chapter 17.

Students with disabilities

Online classes provide a great alternative educational opportunity for students with disabilities. People with physical disabilities can avoid the hassle of getting to campus and navigating the physical classroom. For students with learning disabilities, technology can assist in activities such as prolonging test times and spell-checking documents. However, depending on a person's specific impairment and the institution's knowledge regarding the creation of accessible content, online education may still present some difficulties.

State and federal laws continue to be created that require public institutions to develop all materials in an accessible manner. However, not all those responsible for creating online courses are aware of these regulations or trained on how to implement the guidelines. Therefore, Web sites, course management systems, and course content can sometimes lack design structures that meet accessibility standards. In Chapter 18, we provide a list of questions you can ask to help determine whether an institution is prepared to accommodate your learning needs.

The law provides students with disabilities rights to equal access to information in a comparable format to their peers who are without a disability. However, with this right comes responsibility. In order to receive appropriate and reasonable accommodations, students must voluntarily disclose and document their impairment before accommodations will be made. Accommodations are based on each individual's needs and are usually determined with the help of the institutions' disability services department staff. Find out more about this process in Chapter 18.