

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Seeing what online learning is all about
- » Walking through the process of becoming an online learner
- » Finding out what it takes to succeed in online classes
- » Looking at special populations that may benefit from online courses

Chapter 1

Planning for Your Online Learning Journey

Hello, and welcome to the world of online learning. We are excited that you picked up this book to help you jump into online learning and what it takes to succeed in the online classroom. In this book, we explore the ins and outs of online learning. We share personal stories, from both instructor and student perspectives, as a way to help you understand what is expected of learners and overcome the sometimes false expectations of new online learners. We want to be clear that this relates to learning via a college course as well as learning via workplace training; in either scenario, the shift to learning online requires new skills.

You may have some specific questions about online learning, such as these examples:

- » What is online learning, and how does it differ from the traditional face-to-face classroom?
- » Which institutions offer online programs or courses, and how do I find them?
- » What type of computer and technological skills do I need in order to be a successful online learner?

- » 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 learner. In this chapter, you begin your journey into the virtual world of online learning.

Examining the Characteristics and Advantages of Online Education

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

The nature of online education

The content delivered as part of an online course and the way in which you prove that you're learning that content may vary widely. This list describes a few common formats:

- » **Read material, engage in online discussions with classmates, and then submit 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 the instructor says that you need to post discussions by Monday at midnight, you can work through the weekend and get your ideas posted to the discussion board before you begin your workweek. These courses are often facilitated by an instructor (they're referred to as instructor-led) who not only shares their expertise in the field but also helps guide you through the entire online learning process.
- » **Read material and then take 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 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.

- » **Read materials, log in to a real-time web conference, and then listen to the instructor or interact with peers.** You may take a test or submit papers later to demonstrate your understanding. This *synchronous* (real-time) method of online learning has become quite popular, especially for workplace training and professional development. However, it requires you to adjust your schedule to accommodate the class, just as you would a traditional class. These courses are also instructor-led and 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 learning: The learner (you!) must assume responsibility for learning the material. There's no cyberprof 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 they communicate with you regularly to keep you engaged, but the nature of online learning requires the student to take charge and complete the work.

So, what kind of learner thrives in this kind of educational landscape?

- » **A person who needs flexibility in terms of when courses are offered:** If you have no free moments 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 person who comfortably sets their own agenda and manages their time well:** If you're good at crafting a plan and sticking to it, online learning may be for you. Though the instructor may provide a schedule and deadlines for assignments, you have to work them into your lifestyle.
- » **A person who has strong reading and writing skills:** Because much of what you need to know comes by way of textbooks or web pages, you need to be a decent reader before 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 you an A.
- » **A person 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 learning

Online courses and opportunities to learn have been steadily growing in popularity for the past decade. Here are just a few reasons online learning is 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. In an online course, you can log in and work whenever 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 five miles from your home, the process of packing up your gear, getting to the school, finding parking, and walking to the classroom takes 30 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 8 weeks. Though you may take only one course at a time (or two, over the course of a 16-week semester), these courses move fast! The good news is that these kinds of programs typically run year-round and advance 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 between students in traditional classes gets left behind in the online world.** No one knows whether you are shy, speak with a lisp, or sport 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 situation liberating.

Knowing the Technology and Computer Skills You Need to Succeed



TIP

Many nontraditional or adult students shy away from online education because they're afraid their computer skills aren't sufficient 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 excellent backups when technology breaks or your Internet access is lost.

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

- » A computer with monitor, keyboard, and mouse (a laptop counts!)
- » Access to a reliable Internet connection
- » A web browser (for example, Chrome, Microsoft Edge, or Safari)
- » Speakers, microphone, or headset with microphone (optional, but may be required by some programs)
- » Word processing software such as Word or Google Docs
- » Presentation software such as PowerPoint or Keynote

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

- » Open your Internet browser and navigate to a given website address (or *URL*).
- » Send and receive emails with attachments.
- » Open a word processing application and format, save, and retrieve documents.
- » Read and scroll web pages efficiently.
- » Type quickly and accurately.
- » Organize folders on your computer's hard drive or an external flash drive.
- » Download and install software.
- » Run virus protection software.

Seeing How to Go About Becoming an Online Learner

After you have an idea of what may be involved in online education and a good grasp of the technological competencies you may need, you can turn your attention to finding the right program and school and grabbing your seat in the class. You also need to know the process for applying to a school and getting 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 it's 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.



TIP

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

- » **If all you need is a course or two in one area:** Check with your local 2-year school. Many 2-year colleges offer online courses at a fraction of the cost of traditional 4-year institutions.
- » **If you're looking for a graduate level course in your professional area:** Go back to wherever you earned your undergraduate degree and see whether that institution offers online courses. You already have a relationship with those folks, and you may find that the application and admission processes are streamlined.
- » **If you need to brush up for a career boost:** Check with professional associations. More and more associations offer courses and certifications via online programs. Having an industry-recognized credential might be just what you need.
- » **If you have no idea where to start:** Use a standard search engine to explore the possibilities at major online institutions. We deliberately avoid listing popular schools, because the landscape changes quickly! Plus, every learner needs to do their homework in terms of researching reputable, accredited programs. That said, if you find an interesting prospect, be prepared to receive solicitations the minute you submit a web based form asking for more information.



WARNING

If you do a Google search, the schools listed at the top are most often for-profit schools. Be careful when it comes to for-profit schools! Many are far more interested in taking your money than in offering you a good education. Later we talk about how to look at accreditation. Top of the list may not equate to top in quality!

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

Evaluating programs



Regardless of whether you want to enroll in a single 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 school's website or review its printed material, you should see accreditation credentials listed.

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

- » **General course style:** Are these self-paced courses where you read and take tests, or do they engage the learner in discussion 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 schedule your courses with real-time meetings conducted via web conferencing.
- » **Class size:** How many students does the program squeeze into the virtual classroom? If you're one of 20, that's an acceptable 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 telling statistic. How many students actually complete the courses or degrees? If only 20 percent of starters reach the finish line, the courses may be poorly designed, too difficult, too boring — you get the picture. This area is worth exploring with a counselor or an advisor.
- » **Faculty background and training:** Who teaches at this school? What kinds of credentials do the instructors 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 (SMEs)*, who have impressive professional credentials in their disciplines. The most critical issue is whether these folks know what they're doing when teaching online.
- » **Student support services available:** Who will help you register, select the right courses in the right sequence, and figure out the technology, for example? 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 a program and securing 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, such as 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 program 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.



REMEMBER

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 if that's the direction you're headed. 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 other criteria:** 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 <https://studentaid.gov>.
- » **Loans, via either the government or private lenders:** When you need to pay these back and at what interest rate depend 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 childcare, 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 that they 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 preparing 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, smarty that you are, you're accepted. You receive notice of your acceptance via email; however, some institutions follow up with a more formal acceptance letter via standard US 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 after you've been accepted and describe strategies for moving forward if your application is rejected.

After you've been 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 website where they access the institution's course catalog and register for classes they want. 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 partway between registering and actually starting class. What's left to do? Get oriented! Any decent school provides you with an orientation experience. It may be a series of prerecorded tutorials to guide you through common technology processes or an invitation to attend a live webinar to see and experience the same. Orientation in its simplest form may consist of your receiving a document with printed procedures. See Chapter 7 for full details.

Attitude is everything

Think about the last time you had to do something you had never done. What helped you succeed? Your attitude was probably a huge part of the equation. Having a *growth mindset* means that you're willing to try new ways of learning, even if it means you might not immediately succeed. And if you do fail, a growth mindset turns that failure around into another attempt. Having a growth mindset is all about taking baby steps toward a goal.

With a growth mindset, you'll take in all kinds of new terms related to online learning. You'll experience the learning management system (LMS), and you will work in the cloud. These are exciting new ways to learn!

Most importantly, you have to see yourself as capable. We cover the right mindset in Chapter 8.

Becoming a Star Learner

After you register for classes, it's time to begin learning. This task can be a little nerve-wracking, especially if you haven't been in school for a while. 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 truly succeed in online learning, 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. Take advantage of this opportunity by logging in to 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 9 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 learning 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 daily.

When taking online courses, you have a plethora of academic and technical support. Not only can you connect with your instructor and peers, but most institutions also connect you with academic advisors, technical support staff, guest speakers, and more. Check out Chapter 10 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 in real time (synchronously) each week to discuss course content and upcoming assignments. You can do this by way of several free online tools, such as Google Meet or Zoom.

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.



Online courses employ 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 and questions are much more conversational.

Chapter 11 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 learner, you have more freedom to choose the days and times that you study and complete assignments. This may sound appealing until family and friends want to go see the latest action film or your child begs you to read their 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 12 for information on developing good study habits for online classes.

Working well in a group

Yep, you read that heading 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 skill, patience, and a lot of

communication. To some of you, this won't come as a surprise, because more and more people work remotely. Your job is one giant group project!

As with any group-based task, you can do a few things to help make group work more efficient and effective (as you can find out in Chapter 13):

- » 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.

Being part of a bigger world

One of the most exciting aspects of learning online is that you can meet others from around the world and learn from them. The Internet has opened possibilities your grandparents could not have imagined. It is not uncommon to have students from multiple continents in one course.

Being a *global learner* means having respect for cultural differences. It also requires that you coordinate across time zones and that you are helpful, not critical, when it comes to resolving problems that may arise from language differences.

In addition to describing what it's like to be in a global classroom, we address in Chapter 14 how to work and study from afar.

Minding your online manners and ethics

One problem with communicating mostly by text is that anyone can misinterpret what is written. Therefore, keep humor to a minimum and avoid posting questionable content. You also need to recognize when and where to address individuals when problems arise. If you are having a problem with a peer, politely and privately communicate directly with that person. You will want to include your instructor, who can facilitate resolution if necessary.

If your issue is with the instructor, you might take a different approach. For example, have you ever been in a face-to-face course when someone questioned an instructor rudely or otherwise inappropriately? 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, email, or present. If the idea isn't yours, cite it! If you have a question about whether to cite something, or if 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 15.



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 it plagiarism to repurpose an assignment from one class for another. The penalties for plagiarism can be quite severe, including removal from a program. Again, if you have a question about whether 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 an assignment 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 these formal assessment techniques 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. Alternatively, 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 as well. 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 16.

Transitioning after you're done with school

Many online learners go to school to either start a new career or earn a promotion at their current job after 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 it as an electronic résumé that allows invited visitors to see your academic/work history, sample assignments, and other pertinent information. Find out more about this topic and others related to transitioning in Chapter 17.

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 via online learning. We begin with a discussion of where the youngest group — homeschooled and high school students — fit in, and then move to learners 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 from 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 18, 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.

Learners with disabilities

Online classes provide an exceptional alternative educational opportunity for persons with disabilities. Learners with physical disabilities can avoid the hassle of traveling to campus and navigating the physical classroom. For those 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 learning may still present 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 are trained on how to implement the guidelines. Therefore, websites, LMSs, and course content can sometimes lack design structures that meet accessibility standards. In Chapter 19, 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 learners who have disabilities the right to equal access to information in a comparable format to their peers who are without disabilities. However, with this right comes responsibility. To receive appropriate and reasonable accommodations, persons must voluntarily disclose and document their impairment before accommodations will be made. Accommodations, which are based on each individual's needs, are usually determined with the help of the institutions' disability services department staff. Find out more about this process in Chapter 19.

