

# How to Make Online Learning Work for you

LEARNING AND TESTING ONLINE IS INTIMIDATING TO SOME, BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE

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*“In front of excellence the immortal gods have put sweat, and long and steep is the way to it, and rough at first. But when you come to the top, then it is easy, even though it is hard.”*

—Hesiod, *Works and Days*

**E**ducators often warn students that online learning is not for everyone. Some students who perform well in a traditional classroom setting struggle to complete online courses. So what factors have the greatest impact on student success?

Social scientific research indicates that many students simply lack the motivation and persistence to take advantage of online resources. In this article, we'll explore five tips that can help any student become a better online learner.

## 1) Find your motivation

What motivates you personally to learn online? Online courses can empower students with the advantages of greater convenience and learning efficiency, more timely feedback, and lower costs. Sometimes these benefits provide all the motivation you need to complete an online course, or even pursue an online degree.

However, the lack of face-to-face contact with a devoted instructor and mentor can be an obstacle for some students. One way to overcome this obstacle is for learners to maintain frequent contact with fellow online students. Online peers can supply valuable insights on how to work through personal challenges with technology and maintain motivation throughout a long semester. <sup>(1)</sup>

Family members can also provide vital support and encouragement when they understand the benefits of online

learning. If you need additional incentives, enlist friends and family members to help you set up extrinsic rewards for persisting in the online learning process. A weekend getaway, a movie night, or another well-earned break can provide a light at the end of your online learning tunnel.

## 2) Courage before confidence

The courage to undertake something new often precedes confidence in doing so. This is particularly true for students who are less experienced with internet technology. When you begin an online course, it's natural to experience self-doubt and fear.

You will need to move outside your comfort zone and embrace the risks that come with trying something new. Very few worthwhile pursuits ever come with a guarantee of success. And the fear of failure can severely limit your confidence in learning online.



But confidence and hope have never been manufactured out of thin air. This is where personal courage comes into play. A team of psychologists at Clemson University recently explored the characteristics of what they call personal courage. <sup>(2)</sup>

While we typically see in other people a fearless and confident courage, personal courage tends to be more about acting in the face of difficulty, fear, vulnerability, and anxiety. When you find and exercise your personal courage you will begin to experience the small successes that lead to confidence in an online learning environment.

### **3) Transform anxiety into excitement**

Recent studies on test anxiety have found that students who do well on exams possess the ability to transform their anxieties into greater concentration and excitement. <sup>(3)</sup> These students are able to manage a moderate level of stress to help focus their minds and provide the mental energy to persist in problem solving.

Of course, high levels of anxiety over taking an online exam or using unfamiliar technology can be debilitating. Many students find relief from intense stress by identifying and writing down a list of their specific worries. Such a list can be divided into two columns: things you can control and things you cannot control.

For the things you can control, like preparing for an exam, formulate a plan for resolving the anxiety (e.g., schedule ample time for exam preparation). For things you cannot control, like having to take an exam, embrace your anxiety

and channel it toward greater focus and determination to succeed.

### **4) Cultivate disciplined study habits**

Aristotle promoted a simple idea that is as true today as it was 2,400 years ago: Human beings love to fall into routine, to cultivate deeply-rooted habits. When we develop habits, we naturally expend less mental and emotional energy in figuring out what to do and how to do it.

A set of tasks that was initially strenuous or tedious becomes natural and easy to perform. Something that was originally

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irksome is now pleasurable. Students who take the time to cultivate rigorous study habits learn to enjoy studying with greater ease and consistency.

Set aside a block of uninterrupted time to study every day. Avoid the distractions of cell phones, email, and social media. Wake up early in the morning or find a quiet study room during the day. By maintaining a consistent habit of studying at the same time every day, you'll soon discover the reality of online learning pleasure.

A recent study suggests that time management skills and disciplined study habits are even more important in successful learning than favorable attitudes toward instructors or personal interest in the subject matter. <sup>(4)</sup>

## 5) Persistence is more important than intelligence

This tip is perhaps the most important for online learning excellence. Becoming a more independent learner and adapting to new online technology requires persistence. Persistence is even more important than knowledge and intelligence.<sup>(5)</sup>

If you're relatively new to online learning, then you need to expect some small failures along the way. You might stumble on your first assignment as you figure out how to access online learning resources. You might find that you need to switch to an unfamiliar web browser, or upgrade to a faster computer.

If you do face obstacles with learning technology, be sure to communicate early on with your online instructor or course administrator. Don't hesitate to ask for help in resolving your difficulties. But whatever you do, don't give up. Learn from your mistakes and be patient with the quirks of your online course.

Some online resources are more accessible and instructionally sound than others and some learning management systems are more intuitive than others. But most online courses provide plenty of resources to help you navigate the learning process and gain the knowledge and skills you're looking for.

## Don't hold back

It may be true that some students are more naturally suited for learning online. Some cultures might even be better than others in preparing students for the distinct rigors and study habits of online courses.<sup>(6)</sup>

Don't fret about potential limitations that may or may not affect you. With a firm and disciplined commitment to study, the persistence to climb steep technology learning curves, and the courage to embrace risk in the face of personal limitations, you'll personally have everything it takes to succeed.

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### NOTES

1. See Carolyn Hart (2012). "Factors Associated With Student Persistence in an Online Program of Study: A Review of the Literature." *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 11 (1), 19-42.
2. Cynthia L. S. Pury, Robin M. Kowalski & Jana Spearman (2007). "Distinctions between general and personal courage." *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2 (2), 99-114.
3. See Alison Wood Brooks (2013). "Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-Performance Anxiety as Excitement." *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 143 (3), 1144-1158.
4. M. J. N. Mendezabal (2013). "Study Habits and Attitudes: The Road to Academic Success." *Open Science Repository Education, Online (open-access)*, e70081928. doi:10.7392/Education.70081928.
5. See Hart (2012).
6. See Miguel A. Cerna & Ksenia Pavliushchenko (2015). "Influence of Study Habits on Academic Performance of International College Students in Shanghai." *Higher Education Studies*, 5 (4), 42-55.