
Online Courses: During the Course

Keep up

Keeping up is essential to your success in an online course. Without weekly lectures, online courses can easily be put on the back burner. It is critical to stay on top of weekly readings and assignments.

Go online every day to keep your mind on the course. Even if you only check in briefly, going online will help to keep the course at the forefront of your mind.

Connect with others

Students taking an online class may feel alone or isolated. You can avoid this feeling through active participation in class forums and discussion boards. Ask questions, add to discussions, and strive to make thoughtful contributions to the course.

For example, try to identify a theme, an idea, or a question that you find interesting or have some confidence talking about. Try to engage one of your classmates in a regular 'conversation' about this topic. You may be able to connect with a classmate through Skype, e-mail, or instant messaging.

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Contribute

In most online courses, you will be expected to participate in class forums and discussions, or even to participate in real-time labs or tutorials.

Many of the same strategies that apply to in-class discussions also apply to online discussions.

Preparation is critical to a good discussion. If there are readings or review questions, make sure you are familiar with them before posting a reply on a forum. If you are participating in a tutorial, review examples from class and try to work through problems on your own first.

In some ways, participating in online discussions can be easier than participating in class: you can think carefully about something before you post it, rather than having to think on your feet. Also, many people get nervous speaking in front of groups, and participating in online discussion forums removes some of the pressure associated with speaking in class.

To participate in a discussion, there are a few key strategies that can be helpful.

Craft messages carefully. One of the benefits of online discussion forums is the opportunity to think carefully before you post. Address your instructor and classmates professionally, use formal language, and edit posts for clarity, logic, and flow, as well as spelling and grammar. Be as clear and concise. Your goal should be to make your argument as succinct as possible.

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If you are posting a question, be clear and specific. For example, if you are having difficulty answering a practice problem, give as much information as you can: the module or chapter your question is from, the number of the question, what you have already tried, and what particular difficulty you are having.

"I can't do question 4"

Versus

"I am working on Question 4 from the First Module. I have tried diagramming the problem, and looking at the example problems on page 3, but the unknown we have to solve for is different than in the examples, and I can't figure out how to isolate it"

If you are participating in a forum with a long thread, try to read or skim all the comments or responses before posting. If you are aware of everything that has been said, you are more likely to contribute in a meaningful way.

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Aim to further the discussion with every post. Always give reasons, evidence, data, or examples to back up your opinion. The more evidence you provide, the stronger your argument becomes. Although you should strive to make strong and convincing arguments, be open to new ideas. Discussions involve both agreements and disagreements. When people feel that they are in a supportive and respectful environment, they are more likely to challenge other's opinions. Whether or not you agree with someone, always respond respectfully. Try to build on what has already been said, and acknowledge if there are parts of the argument that you do agree with, or if they have encouraged you to think about something in a new way.

There are a number of roles students can take on to help to move the discussion forward:

Initiator: Starts the discussion and keeps it moving, often by asking questions about what has been posted.

Encourager: Acknowledges when someone has made a particularly insightful comment or asked a great question.

Summarizer: Every so often provides a summary of the discussion for other students to consider and comment on.

Reflector: Reads what others have posted and explains it back in his or her own words, asking the original poster if the interpretation is correct.

Elaborator: Seeks connections between the current discussion and past topics or overall course themes.

Clarifier: Asks questions that challenge other students to think about what has been discussed, especially when there is confusion or lack of clarity.

Synthesizer: Brings together the contributions of several discussants to identify areas of agreement and disagreement, or identifies new themes that have emerged in the discussion.

Students may take on all of these roles from time to time. Good discussions can draw on the collective expertise of the class, give you practice in formulating and communicating comments and questions, and may lead you to consider information in new ways.

Presentations

In some online courses, you may be asked to give a presentation as part of the course requirements. Presenting well online is, in many ways, similar to delivering a quality presentation in person.

If you are using PowerPoint slides, keep them simple. Too much text is distracting, and may lead you to read the slides to your audience. Slides are meant to provide a guide for both you and the audience, and to emphasize important points. They are not meant to be a script. Typically, more slides with less information on each are more effective than fewer slides with more information.

Use as little text as possible, and use visuals such as graphs, diagrams and high-quality photos to emphasize key points. Depending on the presentation software you use, these may be the only visual element your audience sees, so it is critical that they add to the quality of your presentation.

Prepare your talk carefully. What is the purpose of the talk you are giving? Who are your audience? Regardless of the technology you are using, a good presentation connects with the audience. Speak to the most important and interesting points, and deliver information at a level appropriate to your audience. For example, if there are terms that your audience is unlikely to be familiar with define them, but do not waste time defining terms they already know.

It is critical that a presentation make sense and be easy to follow. Many people find that creating an outline makes it easier to put the talk together. You can also make a reverse outline – create an outline after the talk is finished from the slides you have. Look at the outline and ask yourself whether the points you are presenting flow logically.

When you begin, open with something that will grab your audience's attention and introduce what you are going to talk about. Often, the best way to make a talk interesting and engaging is to tell a story. Audiences tend to find stories more interesting and memorable than a string of facts.

Give your audience a brief overview of the presentation. As you move into the main content of your presentation, focus on the most interesting and relevant information in an order that makes sense. Conclude by summarizing the most important points. Choose the key pieces of information you most want your audience to remember.

Think about adding an interactive element to your presentation: a question for discussion, a short video, an activity that can be done as an online working group. Activities help to keep your audience interested and engaged.

Practice your talk before you deliver it, preferably with the presentation software you will be using. Make your practice sessions as similar to the real presentation as possible. Typically, practicing at least 3 times will help you be comfortable with the material.

For more on presentation skills, visit

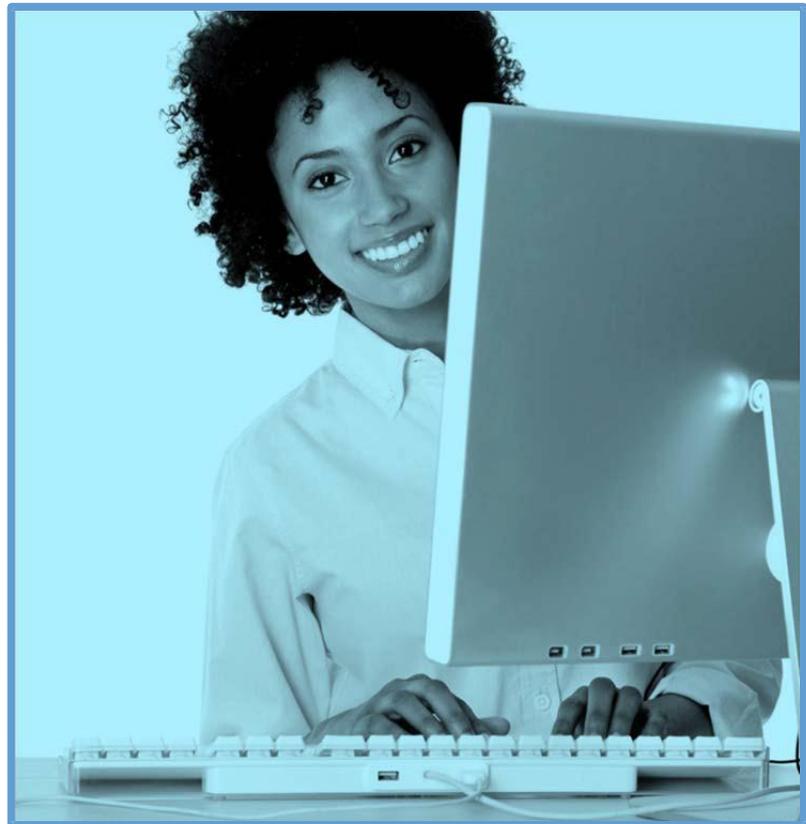
<http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/topics/>

If you are using presentation software that involves only your voice, it is critical that you use your voice to create excitement about your presentation. Speak with enthusiasm. Smile, even if no one can see you. Change the tone of your voice to add interest (e.g. speak slightly more loudly or slowly when making key points). Ensure you are speaking with appropriate volume, and that you can be heard clearly. You may also want to stand up, to allow for better voice projection.

Before you begin your presentation, try to eliminate background noise as much as possible. Ensure your phone is turned off, and let your housemates know you are presenting online and need quiet.

Be prepared for technical glitches. Know the presentation software inside and out, but build in some buffer time in case there are problems with technology.

Remember, an effective online presentation is not about technology, but content and delivery.



Ask for help

If you are having trouble with course content, reach out to your instructor. Your classmates can also be a valuable resource when you need help, just as they are in an on-campus course.

Figure out the specific questions you need to ask and ask for help as soon as possible. Timely help can ensure you don't get stuck.

For help with writing:

sass.queensu.ca/writingcentre

For learning strategies support:

sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies

For career advice:

<https://careers.sso.queensu.ca/home.htm>

In addition to their online resources, The Writing Centre, Learning Strategies, and Career Services all offer in-person individual consultations on campus.

Motivate yourself

When taking an online course, it is critical to maintain motivation. Motivation doesn't appear by itself, but develops through effort and involvement.

If you are finding it difficult to get or stay motivated, think about what has motivated you in the past, either in other courses or in others areas of life. What motivated you then? Is there some way to use a similar form of motivation now? Pride in accomplishment, pleasure in creativity, excitement in learning?



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Set a personal goal to generate some inner motivation. Is there a grade you want to achieve, or a concept you want to master? Do you want to hand in assignments one day early? Do you need this course as a prerequisite or to upgrade your skills for work? Focus on your goal to increase your motivation.

If you are having trouble staying motivated, ask a friend, family member, or another student in the course to help you stay on track. Tell someone your plans for the week, and ask him or her to check in and make sure you are staying on top of your tasks.

If you find the course uninteresting, discuss the material with family or friends. Try asking yourself: "Even though I don't find this course interesting, if there *was one* interesting thing about the course it would be...." Act interested in order to become interested.

Keep track of your accomplishments, whether small or large, to help gain momentum. Think about your attitude and mindset, and remember that motivation comes from within.

Maintain focus

When working independently, it can be difficult to maintain focus for long periods of time. Maintain good sleep, eating, and exercise habits in order to increase your ability to focus.

Scheduling time for uninterrupted work can be difficult in the context of a busy life. If you are trying to take an online course while balancing family and work obligations, think about the practical support you need to succeed (e.g. child care, a designated area to work)

When working on an online course, think about the time of day you are most alert. If possible, try to schedule your work for your peak time.

Develop a routine place, time, and pattern to your study sessions.

Designate an area where you can complete your work without interruption. Whether it is a room in your house or a coffee shop, think about whether you work best with complete silence or ambient noise. Limit external distractions as much as possible. Turn off your phone, and save or print course materials if possible to avoid online distractions as you study.

Plan your work time and your break time. Blocks of time (2+ hours each) divided into 30-50 minute periods with a short break (5-10 minutes) are effective.

For more on concentration, visit:

<http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/topics/>

Try the "5 More Rule". Commit to working solidly for 5 (minutes, pages, sentences...). Do the task you committed to, and then intentionally decide whether to work another "5 More" or not.

Reward yourself when you complete your goals.



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Understand the material

In addition to participating in online discussions and forums, you should pay careful attention to any Learning Objectives, review questions, study guides, or resources offered by your instructor. These are created to guide you through the course.

Learning objectives may be included in the syllabus, or they may be given for each section or unit. The text may also have learning objectives. Learning objectives are a great way to focus your attention and identify the most important material.

Online courses often require high levels of critical thinking. Students are expected to learn the material independently, and then apply their knowledge on tests and assignments. This means that test questions will have somewhat different details than questions from the course, although the concepts will overlap.

Critical thinking is an active process – it involves questioning what you are reading rather than passively absorbing the information. As you read, think about the structure of the text, the author's main point, the validity of the arguments, and whether or not you think the conclusions are justified.

When you think about how information could be applied in the real world, or how information relates to what you already know or have learned in other classes, or question whether the author is making a valid argument, reading is more interesting. Reading actively can also increase your understanding and your retention of the material.

For more on academic reading, visit:

<http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/topics/>

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Four Levels of Questions (in ascending order of complexity)

Questioning at various levels moves you to thinking at those various levels. When we ask only basic questions, we think only the most basic thoughts. When we question at deeper levels, we think more deeply.

Summary & Definition Questions (focus on facts and details)

- What is/are...?
- Who...? When...? Where...?
- How much...? How many...?
- What is an example of...?

Analysis Questions (focus on concepts)

- How...?
- What are the reasons for...?
- What are the types/functions/processes of...?
- What are the causes/results of...?
- What is the relationship between X and Y?
- How does ...apply to...?
- What is/are the problems or conflicts or issues...?
- What are possible solutions/resolutions to these problems or conflicts or issues...?
- What is the main argument or thesis of...?
- How is this argument developed...?
- What evidence or proof or support is offered...?
- What are the other theories arguments from other authors...?

Hypothesis Questions

- If...occurs, then what will happen...?
- If...had happened, then what would be different...?
- What does theory X predict will happen...?

Evaluation

- Is ... correct or incorrect?
- ...effective or ineffective?
- ...relevant or irrelevant?
- ...clear or unclear?
- ...logical or illogical?
- ...proven or not proven?
- ...ethical or unethical?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of...?
- What is the best solution to the problem/conflict/issue?
- What should or should not happen?
- Do I agree or disagree? What is my opinion?
- What is my support for my opinion?

Source:

<http://www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/downloads/reading.PDF>

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Online test taking

Many online courses require online quizzes, tests, or exams. The following

suggestions are intended to provide some general strategies for taking tests online. Each online test is different. Before you begin, make sure you are aware of the format and structure your instructor is using for your particular course.

For more on exam prep, visit:

<http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/topics/>

Prepare

Before you take the test, review the learning objectives of the chapter, module, or lecture you will be quizzed on and focus your preparation on these areas.

Complete any available practice questions:

- Instructors may post practice questions
- Your textbook may have a study guide or website that includes practice questions

Understand test logistics

Be sure to review any information on the format of the test (e.g. how many questions will be on the test, whether there is a time limit) because each test may be slightly different.

Be aware whether the test is open book. Ensure you know the following:

- What is the procedure to login to the test?
- Can you save your answers throughout the test?
- Can you return to questions if you skip over them initially?
- How do you submit the test?
- Will you receive an alert about unanswered questions?

If you are unsure of any of these details, e-mail the instructor well in advance.

Begin the test

Begin the test only when you are ready. Most online tests have a time limit. You may not be able to stop the test once you have started, so make sure you have a block of time available in which you can complete the entire test.

Take the test somewhere you will not be disturbed. You may want to hang a sign on your door saying "Online test in progress – do not disturb" and let family and friends know you are busy.

Turn off all non-essential programs on your computer, turn off your phone to avoid disruptions and have scrap paper, pens, water, and a timer or clock nearby.

Make a plan

When you first access the test read the directions carefully.

Make sure that you note if the test has a time limit. Have a clock nearby to keep track of the time. Do not use your phone to keep track of the time. Turn your phone off. If there is a timer on the screen and you find it distracting, use a post-it note to cover it up.

Make a plan of action based on the time limit. Consider the total number of questions and the time limit; determine how much time you should spend on each question. Know how many questions should be completed after 10 minutes, 20 minutes, etc.

If it is possible, and time allows, go through the whole test twice;

- On the first pass through, answer all the easy questions, and mark the questions you need more time to think about (jot down the numbers of those questions).
- On the second pass, return to questions you were unsure of. You may find clues that will trigger your memory on the more difficult questions as you go through the test.

Answer the questions

Read each question carefully 3 to 4 times. Read it out loud to make sure you process every word. Identify key words such as "not" or "except" – these words can completely change the meaning of a question.

For tricky questions, re-state the question in your own words. What is the question asking?

If you find yourself getting confused by having several alternatives, use your hand or a piece of paper to cover up alternatives before you read the question stem, and try to predict the answer.

For questions with multiple response combinations, think about each option as true or false. Mark each option (e.g. with an "X" or "✓") as you work through the question. There may be several correct answers. If you have time, and you are finding a question particularly difficult, it may be helpful to write out the options on a piece of paper.

Remember, you want to select the "best" answer, the one that accounts for the most data, greatest number of circumstances, etc. There may be several "correct" answers.

If there are any errors on the test itself (e.g. a question fails to load), write down the question number, and the exact nature of the problem. Complete the test to the best of your ability.

When you have marked all your answers, review them once more before submitting if time permits.

After the test

Use any feedback you receive to learn the answers to the questions you missed, or to observe patterns in your mistakes.

There are a number of common mistakes made on exams. For example, did you misunderstand the question, provide an incomplete answer, not really understand the course material, or run out of time? Be aware of these patterns so you can improve your approach to exams by reading the question more carefully, providing more detailed answers, improving your study strategies, or planning and managing your time more effectively.

If you found errors in the test itself, send your instructor a message immediately after you complete the test. Let him or her know if some questions were unclear or if there were technical glitches with your test. This will allow your instructor to adjust your grade if needed or to fix the test for other students.

For more on debriefing the exam, visit:

<http://sass.queensu.ca/learningstrategies/topics/>