

Online Learning

Online learning is increasingly common at Queen's, where nearly 3000 students take courses online every year. Whether you're taking a course entirely online or one that combines on-campus tutorials with internet-based discussion and lectures (a "blended" course), online learning requires special skills.

Online courses are just as intellectually challenging as on-campus courses. You'll still be asked to read articles and books, complete assignments on time, write tests and exams, and display academic integrity. But in online courses, you may find that your professors and classmates seem distant or absent, that your written communication skills are called on more regularly, and that your ability to motivate yourself to work independently is challenged.

This guide is just an introduction to the keys to success in online courses. You may find our modules on [time management](#) and [motivation and procrastination](#) useful. If this is your first university course, or you're returning to education after a long time away, we encourage you to work through [Academics 101](#), a series of online tutorials we've developed to help you hone essential academic skills while at Queen's. If you need one-on-one help, SASS offers [academic skills and writing appointments](#) online.

Keys to Success

Review the course syllabus.

As in any other course, your first job is to read the syllabus, which you should find on the course homepage (generally through your onQ portal, although some faculties use different online platforms). If there's anything that isn't clear or that you don't understand, make sure you ask your professor or TA for help. Here are some [guidelines for communicating with professors and TAs](#).

Understand the platform.

Spend time exploring the layout and organization of your online course. Refer to the syllabus, explore menus, and ask questions if you're unsure. Avoid missing an important resource or losing marks on a quiz because you didn't know where to find it on the course page or how it worked. You may be asked to write quizzes and exams entirely online, so if your prof plans to do a dry run of an online exam (i.e., run one for no marks), take it. It's a great opportunity to understand how the real exam will be administered. [Prepare for online exams](#) in the same way as you would an on-campus exam.

Be an active participant.

Developing a learning community is vital for success in an online course. Think of discussion boards as virtual class discussions. They're a chance to share ideas with peers and show professors your critical thinking. Even if the professor doesn't comment, she is reading the thread to make sure the conversation is staying on track. Making connections with your peers can be more difficult in an online course, but it's still important. Use online tools and helpful apps to connect with your peers and instructors. Ask questions, share ideas, engage!

Take responsibility.

You're responsible for all of your own learning in all university classes. In an online course, where you may never meet your teachers or classmates, that's even more true. It's up to you to do readings, watch video lectures, complete assignments on time, and work towards mastering the course content. That might take, on average, 8-10 hours a week—more if you're taking a condensed summer course. You might find [our time management guide](#) helpful.

Get organized.

Contrary to many students' expectations, online courses are not easier because they appear to easily fit into any schedule. They require plenty of work and organization! Treat your online course just as you would an on-campus course by scheduling time to "attend" regularly—3-4 times a week—and to keep up with readings and homework.

1. Manage your time

Good time management skills will help you get started, stay on task, and finish on time. That's especially true when grades are increasingly based on a large number of small tasks, rather than a single assignment and exam. If you're already using [a weekly schedule](#), make sure to slot in times every week to check in with your online course to ensure you're aware of approaching deadlines and have apportioned sufficient time to tackle them. Professors also post course updates online, so regularly logging in will ensure you're aware of important news.

1. Log in and accomplish specific tasks

Reviewing the syllabus and your course pages will help you know what you have to do and when you have to do it. Then, log in regularly (two or three times a week) with specific tasks in mind each time. Think of it like a regular on-campus class: sometimes you attend a lecture, sometimes you block off time for homework or reading, and sometimes you participate in a tutorial or group discussion.

For example, this schedule illustrates a possible week's schedule. In total, the plan below allows the student to spend 10.5 hours on coursework:

	Morning	Evening
Tuesday	Start week's readings (2 hours)	Finish week's readings (1.5 hours)
Thursday	Write week's notes Complete weekly quiz (1.5 hours)	
Friday	Write group project (1 hour)	Edit group project writing (1 hour)
Saturday	Watch weekly video lecture (2 hours)	Write three discussion board posts Check in with group members for midterm project (2 hours)

Try planning and sticking to a schedule like this one. Your specific tasks might change over the course of the term, but if you make the commitment to log in regularly, you'll equip yourself for success.

Expect the unexpected.

Be prepared for glitches and issues; that's just the nature of technology. Have a back-up plan and keep copies of your work, even after you've submitted it. If your computer fails, you can use the computers at Stauffer Library. If you can't get there, contact your professor to let them know about your problem.

Group Work and Discussion Boards

Group work

Group work can be tricky in general, but even more so when you're working online and can't meet with your team in person. Since professors frequently set group assignments in online courses, try referring to [the SASS guide to group work](#) or using a helpful app (e.g., [Slack](#), [Google Hangouts](#), [Skype](#), etc.) to help you manage group work online. When using apps, make sure your entire group agrees to use whichever app you choose and that you all check regularly for updates to chat threads, comments on shared work, etc.

Discussion boards

The following was developed based on the suggestions and strategies in the University of Leicester's resource for seminar and tutorial participation.

In an online course, you'll often be asked to explain thoughts and communicate with others solely in writing. Many online courses make participation in a discussion board or forum mandatory. You may be asked to post regularly, comment on others' ideas, or pose questions about course topics. If this is a requirement, make sure to read your syllabus carefully for your professor's expectations about what you'll need to contribute. Participating in fruitful discussions is also a great way to connect with classmates and teachers whom you may never have met in person.

To ensure you are getting the most out of the discussion board format, think of your responsibility as a 3-step process: preparation, discussion, and follow-up.

Preparation

Keep up with the required coursework (e.g., readings, weekly quizzes) so you'll be able to understand, analyze, and meaningfully comment in the discussion. In advance of posting anything, try:

- summarizing the main ideas from that week's readings and video lectures in your own words. Use our guides to [reading](#) and [notetaking](#) for help.
- brushing up on relevant topics from previous weeks when necessary.
- keeping a list of topics that would make good discussion board posts or that relate to the week's key themes: thoughts or questions you have; tricky or unsubstantiated issues; topics you found especially interesting or surprising.

Discussion

What to say

You may be nervous about engaging in public discussion, in person or online. It can feel like there's a lot of pressure to show the professor you're a great student, but that's not what academic discussion is

for: the idea of the discussion is to reflect on, challenge, or constructively add to others' ideas. If you have a thought or a question about the material, someone else may share your ideas—and they'll be grateful when you post them. Try the following strategies:

- Reading the whole discussion before you add a comment. It's much easier to join a conversation if you've been listening long enough to know what people are talking about and what's been said.
- Adding simple and constructive ideas to a complex discussion is okay. Generally, the best discussions don't arrive at an answer immediately. They take time to explore different avenues first, so it's okay if you don't have all of the answers straight away.
- Sharing responsibility with your classmates. Don't dominate or avoid the discussion boards—find a balance between leading and standing aside for others.
- Being positive and respectful of others' opinions and interpretations of the material.

Adhering to the following strategies will ensure your posts remain on topic, insightful and appropriate:

Acknowledgement

Link your comments and posts to what others have said, to show you're following and building on the discussion, not just interjecting with unconnected thoughts. Use names and short, direct quotes to make it clear to whom/what you're referring.

Agreement

Agreeing with your classmates is a nice way to start. Try something like "I agree with Will that..." or "Will makes a good point about..." Having shown where you agree, develop the discussion by adding a new connection, a point of disagreement, or showing the idea in a new context. For example:

"Yes, I agree with Will that Said was taken out of context in that case. The same is true of another text we read..."

Observation

Adopting the observation strategy involves commenting on the state of the discussion as a whole, showing that you're appreciative of all the efforts your fellow discussants are making and that you can take a broader view of the material. For example:

"We began by discussing Noonuccal, but now we've moved away from that..."

"It feels like our discussion of this week's reading has highlighted some of the key course concepts. For example..."

Offer alternative views

It can be tricky to disagree with other students, but presenting a well-reasoned alternative viewpoint shows your engagement with the material. Don't be afraid to disagree with someone, so long as you remain civil and explain your reasoning. Start by showing you understand the point that was being made, then explain why you disagree. The explanation is crucial: it will show you're not just *arguing*, you're engaging in critical thinking, which demonstrates real understanding of your course.

e.g., “You said that Vygotsky’s theories remain relevant for today’s teachers, but doesn’t that contradict with...”

Involvement

Outstanding students try to make new points, direct the conversation, and bring other people into the discussion. Explaining the logic behind why you are trying to shape the discussion will ensure that you’re not just cutting other students off, but trying to lead the discussion towards a new and interesting place.

e.g., “I think we need to look more closely at the impact of...because...” or “What Carmen said earlier about lateral violence was really interesting, since... Do you think that..?”

How to say it

Online communication has a reputation for bringing out the worst in people. The lack of face-to-face interaction can make you feel anonymous, granting permission to behave differently from how you would otherwise. That means it’s important to participate in online discussions with a professional tone—that means both *what* you say and *how* you say it.

Remember that a discussion board is an academic environment. You are being graded in part on how you interact and communicate your ideas. Remember that once you’ve pressed send on your comment, you can’t take it back. Spend time carefully thinking about content and tone before making your comments public. The following rules usually help:

- You should always be respectful of your classmates, your professor, and the material you are working with.
- Find out if your professor has suggested a code of conduct or posted a guide to communication. Follow it.
- Try to remain objective and don’t get personal. Comment on course content, not the person expressing an opinion.
- If you feel yourself getting upset, take a break to calm down before responding. Read over your post before submitting to make sure you’re saying what you mean to say.
- Use the strategies in the table above to keep the discussion on track and defuse potential conflict before it escalates.

If you’re struggling with how to express your thoughts in online forums, [book a writing appointment](#) at SASS.

Follow-up work

Depending on the purpose of the discussion board communications, your understanding of the course material may be enhanced and/or you may wish to re-examine or extend your readings on a particular topic. Be sure to keep track of any connections, relationships, reinterpretations, problem solving methods, or analyses that require follow-up.

Finally, remember that in an academic environment, you are subject to [academic integrity](#)—even if it’s on a discussion board. You cannot use your classmate’s thoughts or words without proper citations. (See [OWL Purdue’s citation style chart](#) for an example of how to cite discussion board posts in APA.)

Where do I go from here?

All of SASS's services are available to students taking online courses. Online [writing and academic skills appointments](#) can [be booked here](#), so you never need to feel like you're alone.

The following resources are useful guides to some of the content discussed on this page:

- [5 discussion ground rules for the online classroom](#) from Colorado State University
- [15 rules of Netiquette for online discussion boards](#) from Touro College
- [Tips for success in online courses](#) from the University of Guelph

Queen's provides extensive support to both online and on-campus students. The following services may be of use:

- [Queen's Student Accessibility Services](#)
- [Adaptive Technology Centre](#)
- [Online Learning at Queen's](#)
- [Queen's Arts & Science Online](#)
- [OnQ Support](#)

Online courses might seem like a challenge, especially if you've been out of school for a while, you're juggling lots of other commitments, or you're unused to using online tools for communication and study. Try adopting some of the habits outlined in this guide to ensure you're in top shape for the course and, as ever, if you have questions, just ask—the staff at SASS are a great first port of call!