Being a successful online learner

It can be confusing and a little overwhelming to have to re-orient yourself to new expectations for your courses after you already have a system in place for your learning needs.

With the transition to online learning, it is important to adopt a positive attitude about the opportunities and challenges that learning in an online environment present. A lot of work has been done behind the scenes by faculty to ensure that learners will have access to the same learning experiences in this new delivery mode.

This page provides suggestions that can help you be successful in an online environment. Links to other resources have also been shared in appropriate places.

The suggestions are organised to match the activities that you will need to manage in order to be a successful online learner

* [Receiving information](#_Receiving_information),
* [Communicating with others](#_Communicating_with_others), and
* [Preparing and submitting assignments](#_Preparing_and_submitting).

A summary of the important ideas can be found in **bold** near the beginning of each section for quick reference.

# Receiving information

Information management is an important skill for online learning.

Summary: **Review the Brightspace shells for your courses often, check your e-mail regularly (minimum 2 times a day), stay organised in a way that makes sense for your learning needs, and don’t be afraid to look for more information on your own.**

In an online learning environment, it is important to stay on top of the information that is provided in the Brightspace shell for each of your courses. The automated notifications from Brightspace are helpful for this, but you should not rely on them entirely.

* Review all the Brightspace shells for your courses to ensure that you know the expectations for each course.
  + Do you have to be connected to the course (through Zoom, for example) at a specific time in order to remain up to date with material?
  + Are there new materials that have been posted to help you be successful?
  + Have any due dates and deadlines been changed?
  + What tools do you need to access in order to continue learning?
  + Are there any additional ways (discussion boards or virtual office hours, for example) to stay in touch with classmates and the instructor?
* Collect all this information in one place or document so that you do not have to spend as much time looking for it again in the future.
  + Contact classmates or your professor if you are having trouble determining the expectations for each course. See the suggestions for positive e-mails [below](#_E-mail).
* Create a schedule for yourself and do your best to stick to it. A routine can be a good friend when adapting to new situations (For more Study Skills, visit The Learning Portal’s Study Skills Hub -- <https://tlp-lpa.ca/home/study-skills>).
  + Your original timetable for the semester is a good place to start. Some adjustments may be required as a result of the current situation.
* Ensure that you are checking your Algonquin College e-mail account a minimum of twice a day, preferably once in the morning and once later in the afternoon or early evening.
* Set aside time each day to visit the Brightspace shell for each course to avoid any surprises. If you are visiting regularly, it won’t take very long to identify any changes or additions since your last visit.
* If you have been relying on a physical binder to keep yourself organised during the semester keep that process going. Just because the course is online does not mean your notetaking has to be online
  + At the same time, think about setting up folders for each of your courses on your device so that you can download notes and materials and keep them available for use when you are not connected.
  + Remember that your Office 365 account includes access to more than just e-mail when you login using a browser. The OneNote app, which can also be downloaded to your device, is a virtual binder that may help you to organise both the information from your courses and the assignment that need to be completed (Check out this video from the Student Learning Centre on how to access Office 365 from your Live@AC e-mail account -- <https://youtu.be/051Zpx6t6Io>).
* Use the learning resources that remain available to all learners:
  + The Algonquin Library's Preparing to Learn Online Top Tips -- <https://algonquincollege.libguides.com/top-tips>
  + Online Peer tutoring -- <https://algonquincollege.libguides.com/slc/peer-tutoring>
  + Online Coaching -- <https://algonquincollege.libguides.com/slc/coaching>
  + Centre for Accessible Learning (CAL) --<https://www.algonquincollege.com/cal/>
  + LinkedIn Learning -- <https://algonquincollege.libguides.com/LinkedIn-Learning>

Successful online learners know that information is the foundation upon which learning is based and they are not afraid to go looking for more information and share it with others to build stronger learning experiences for all.

# Communicating with others

Regular and timely communication is another important skill for online learning.

Summary: **Take advantage of all communication options available in your courses, practice positive communication strategies, and reach out to classmates and instructors to keep learning.**

Whether your courses require you to meet with the instructor and your classmates at a specific time (synchronous) or allow you to continue learning at times that suit your personal schedule and responsibilities (asynchronous), communication is an essential part of online learning and should not be overlooked.

Under the current circumstances, there are three methods of communication that are commonly being used:

* [E-mail](#_E-mail),
* [Discussion forums](#_Discussion_forums), and
* [Zoom videoconferencing](#_Zoom_videoconferencing).

Successful online learners take advantage of all the available opportunities for communication to support each other with respect and to ensure that they are clear about course expectations and requirements.

## E-mail

A few guidelines to keep e-mail communication positive and effective include:

* When writing an email, as much as possible, include complete thoughts and details to ensure your message is clearly communicated. Allow up to 48 hours (or an agreed-upon period of time between you and your peers/professor) for a reply.

* Meaningful subject lines improve communication. A good subject line would include the reason for sending the message, such “Questions about the group project.”

* It is polite to start an e-mail with a greeting, “Hi,” and to include a closing at the end “Thank you.”

* Take time to review e-mails for errors and for completeness. Use the technology tools that are available to help with that review. An e-mail is not like a phone conversation. Corrections cannot be made in real-time.

* It is better to send one, longer e-mail with all the information, rather than a lot of short e-mails with one or two items in each.

## Discussion forums

When communicating on a discussion forum, the following suggestions can be kept in mind in order to get the most out of the learning experience:

* Imagine you are talking to someone face-to-face when writing the post. Say “Hi” when starting and include some encouragement for others to participate in the conversation at the end: “What do you think?” or “Did I miss anything?” or “Are there other options that could work here?”

* Use a conversational tone without being too informal. Avoid text speak and other short forms that may not be familiar to everyone.

* Take time to review your message for errors and for completeness before hitting the “Post” button.

* Remember that the discussion forum is a public forum for all members of the class, and not a place for private conversations.

* Show respect for your classmates and their opinions when replying to posts and contributing your ideas to the conversation. The goal of the discussion forum is discovering new ideas and acquiring knowledge.

## Zoom videoconferencing

Zoom may be a new tool for many. Videoconferencing in a professional setting is different from catching up with friends and family. The current situation provides us with a great opportunity to learn new skills that will be helpful in our careers. The following tips identify some strategies for using Zoom professionally and contributing to a positive learning experience for all:

* Take the time to familiarize yourself with the Zoom interface and the way it works. It would be best if you have used Zoom once or twice before the first-class activity (For more about using Zoom as a learner, visit the Library’s Zoom for Students page -- <https://algonquincollege.libguides.com/zoom/students>).

* Use the tools available in Zoom to control both your audio and video presence, especially in large groups. It will be easier for all participants if your audio is muted when you are not speaking.

* Remember that video calls are not the same as audio calls. You are on camera. Be thoughtful of your actions and your surroundings.

* Imagine that you are sitting in an actual room meeting with the people participating and behave accordingly. Minimise surrounding distractions when participating in a video meeting in order to keep yourself focused.

* Try to be on time when joining the session, especially if presentations are happening in real-time. Material from the beginning could be missed and that could cause you confusion throughout the session.

Successful online learners know that communication is an important part of the learning experience. Many of you may already have communication networks in place to support each other while you are learning. These are certainly valuable at times like these in order to maintain a sense of community.

At the same time, don’t hesitate to take those quick questions or chats that took place before or after class with your instructor online. Be mindful of the communication preferences expressed by your instructors and reach out to them with your questions or concerns.

It is especially important to connect with your instructors and self-identify any issues you may be facing as a result of moving online. These can be technological issues you are facing accessing the materials, as well as issues adapting to online delivery, or issues related to competing responsibilities. We are all in this together. Please reach out.

# Preparing and submitting assignments

Demonstrating your learning by preparing and submitting assignments effectively is another skill of online learning.

Summary: **Take the time to get organized and track due dates, be flexible and considerate of others when working in groups, double-check submission requirements and deadlines, and contact your instructors when there are questions, issues and concerns.**

The process of preparing and submitting assignments requires more attention than we may be used to when we move to online environments. We have a lot of experience completing work in a classroom and handing it in before we leave. Online learning requires us to ensure that we are clear about assignment requirements, and that we pay attention to the details outlined for submitting our work.

* Take the time to get organized in a way that makes sense to you. (For more Study Skills, visit The Learning Portal’s Study Skills Hub -- <https://tlp-lpa.ca/home/study-skills>)
  + You can use a calendar app, a to do list app, something you create by hand, a document on your computer or another approach you may already be using.
  + The goal is to be able to “see” what each week looks like now and to ensure that all your courses assignments and deadlines have been identified.
  + The course calendar in Brightspace, the Course Section Information (CSI) document, and any announcements about the changes that have taken place can help you get organized.
  + A copy of your timetable from before classes were suspended can be a helpful starting point.
* Remember that group assignments will require clear communication between group members and some flexibility in the planning. (Check out the Online workshops available from the Library -- <https://algonquincollege.libguides.com/slc/library-lab> )
  + Find out quickly if your instructor wants to monitor the progress your group is making. This could mean that your group will need to use a dedicated group space set up in Brightspace.
  + To account for all the different responsibilities that group members may have, try to work with each other and take on component(s) of the assignment based on your skillsets. Determine clear deadlines for completing each component. A shared document on OneDrive, for example, would allow group members to add information at times that work for them, rather than a specific time.
  + While the ability to work in groups and teams is an important skill to develop, remember that different people have different approaches to group work and different skills to contribute. Create an inclusive atmosphere for your team where every member has a voice.
  + Try to pick technology tools, like OneDrive, Google Docs, e-mail, and chat, that are familiar for all members.
  + If you do run into problems with your group, contact your instructor as soon as possible.
* Review assignment submission requirements often and ask any questions about things that are unclear.
  + Be clear about how the assignment should be submitted. What format(s) are acceptable? Is it submitted in Brightspace? Is it submitted by e-mail? Are all the necessary parts included? Is a specific file name required?
  + Contact your instructor if you have any questions. Remember the suggestions for [positive e-mails](#_E-mail) above.
* Double-check deadlines as they approach to ensure that you are on time with submissions.
  + Is there a specific time of day that the assignment is due? Is it noon? Is it 6:00 pm? Is it midnight?
  + For tests, be sure about whether it starts and finishes at a specific time (from 3:00 pm to 4:30 pm on Wednesday) or if you can set aside a set amount of time over a three-day period to complete the test (2 hours before Thursday at 6:00 pm).
  + Make note of any assignments that require you to be available at a specific time (A presentation or interview on Zoom at 11:00 am on Thursday).
* Contact your instructor if you are experiencing any challenges with preparing and submitting assignments.
  + Unlike a face-to-face classroom, relying on someone else to ask a question that is the same or similar to yours is not possible. It is important to reach out to your instructor so that you can have the information you need to be successful.
  + Important conversations about workload still need to take place with online learning. Contact your instructor as soon as you realise you may have problems submitting work on time. Be open and honest.

Successful online learners know that preparing and submitting assignments thoroughly and with care is an important part of the learning experience. They seek answers to their questions proactively and remain in contact with their instructors about challenges they are facing.