Foster Care to Academic Success

Succeeding at Online Coursework

It takes special equipment, special skills, and special dedication to do well in an online class. Do you have what it takes?

- **Special equipment (and RELIABLE INTERNET!)**

Computer	Minimum Recommendation	Ideal Recommendation
Windows computer	600Mhz 128MB RAM Sound card (class specific, check with your instructor) Windows 2000, XP	800+MHz 256MB+ RAM Sound card Windows XP or higher
Macintosh computer	600MHz 256MB RAM MAC OS X 10.4	800+MHz 512MB+ RAM MAC OS X 10.5 or higher

- **Special skills**
    - **Computer skills** – a good grasp of computer essentials including Microsoft Office Word, Excel and PowerPoint; Blackboard; email; and search engines such as Google and Yahoo.
    - **Reading comprehension** – online classes rely solely on the written word. There is no lecture, no face-to-face class time. Everything is text-based and must be read online unless printed off from the internet.
    - **Writing proficiency** – there is no raising your hand and squirming in your seat, "I know! I KNOW!" All communication is written and the more clearly you are able to formulate your thoughts, the better grade you will receive.

- **Special dedication**
    - **Time management** – you do not have class from 4:00-5:30 on Tuesdays and Thursdays; you have to set your own schedule. There are certain fixed events, but they may be few and far between, such as "Post five responses by midnight, October 10th," or "the midterm must be completed by midnight, November 1st." It is up to YOU to keep up with the syllabus and finish your assignments on time.

- o **Self-motivation** – you need to be able to solve problems on your own, through research and your own effort. You need to access online resources and find answers on your own. You need to set your own goals and work to achieve them. You need to want to do it.
- o **Participation** – you HAVE to participate in online classes. You may be required to post as often as every day or two. If you don't participate fully and engage in conversation with your classmates, you will not benefit from online coursework.
- o **Persistence** – online classes are *asynchronous*. That means that your time and somebody else's are not the same. You may post at 3:00 in the morning but not receive any replies until 4:00 the next afternoon. If you email your teacher a question, you may not get an answer for 24 hours.
- o **Independence** – unlike courses taught in the classroom, online classes are entirely independent study. Your teacher is not a lecturer, standing at a podium spouting pearls of wisdom. Rather, he or she is a guide on your journey of discovery.

It may be that you don't particularly WANT to take an online class, but you have other reasons for doing so. You broke your leg or you don't have a car this semester or you just had a baby.

Either way, here are our best suggestions for succeeding at an online class.

First, make sure your computer skills are up to snuff.

- As soon as the course materials are available, spend time online learning to navigate the site. Go on Blackboard, if that's what the class uses (most classes do), and post an introduction. Visit the syllabus page, take a sample quiz just to get the hang of clicking those buttons, look at various resources.
- Some classes use Excel or PowerPoint. If you're not familiar with these programs, play around with them. You can't hurt anything as long as you don't save it!

Start the class right.

- Get a pocket folder in which to keep important documents. Print out the syllabus, the assignments and any other useful sheets such as lists of email addresses, telephone numbers and websites.
- Make a folder on your computer for all of your course-related work such as papers and drafts of postings.

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- Write all important due dates on your calendar. If you use an email system such as Outlook, put them on your online calendar and they'll pop up as reminders. If you have a posting that's due daily or weekly by a certain time, set a regular alarm on your phone.
- Organize your environment. Make sure you have a good chair and proper lighting, and that there is room enough at your computer station for any books, notebooks or papers you might need.
- Set a time to study. Actually, we're going to put this in huge, bold letters.

Pick a regular time to study.

Unlike with classroom courses, there is no set class time and you have to choose it
yourself. Find a REGULAR time that is convenient
to you, when you are alert and when you know you
will have at least 45 uninterrupted minutes.
Pretend it's in-the-class time and you HAVE to attend.

Stick to it.

Honestly, this is the most important advice we can give you. Online classes are YOUR responsibility. Nobody is going to make you log on, nobody is going to make you post, and nobody is going to miss you if you don't participate. (I can hear them now –"Where on earth is SQNP119? Haven't heard from her in days!") If you want to do well in an online class, you HAVE to log on and you HAVE to participate.

Doing the work.

Like any other course, online classes follow a syllabus and assignments are due on a certain date. Some online classes require regular postings, others that you post a certain number of times by a deadline. For some, there is a midterm and final exam that you have to take at a specific time on a specific day. For others, there is simply a deadline for these assignments.

- Again, PRINT OUT your syllabus and assignment list. Keep them handy to keep on track. Make sure you meet all deadlines – if the professor says, "post by midnight on Monday," you CANNOT squeeze by at 12:17. Quizzes and exams shut down after the deadline.
- Online reading is different from reading a book. Some students find it easier to print out chapters as they go; others to read from the screen and take notes.

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Keeping up with the reading is even more critical in an online course than in the classroom setting because it is your ONLY source of information.

- Stay in close communication with the professor. Ask questions about course content and assignments as soon as you have them, because there may be a delay in getting an answer.

- Participate in online discussion. Post! Agree with your classmates or feel free to disagree – this will prompt the debate that is such an important part of learning. **When you post, however –**

Read your work carefully. Proofread for spelling, grammar and content. Remember, your postings are public and the only way your classmates and professor will get to know you. Think of how your words will be received.
- Be polite
- Use full sentences
- Check your spelling
- Don't USE ALL CAPITAL LETTERS which are hard to read and look like ONLINE YELLING.

Once you hit send, you cannot take your words back.

A word on plagiarism

When all of your work is written and involves research into other written words, it can be easy to take someone else's work by accident. Plagiarism is defined as, "the unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own original work." (www.dictionary.com) **Be very careful, in your postings, essays and exams, that you never use material from other sources without acknowledgement.**

Online classes can be as stimulating and instructive as classroom courses, but YOU have to take all responsibility for

- Managing your time
- Motivating yourself
- Keeping in touch with the professor
- Engaging with your fellow students through postings or online forums
- Meeting every deadline

One more thing – if you are interested in taking online classes but you're not sure you are ready to give up the classroom entirely, try a hybrid class. One session a week is taught in the classroom, but all work is done on line. It's truly the best of both worlds!

Good luck, whatever you decide.