Beginning your new journey as an online student can be both exciting and scary. Whether it’s your first time as an online student, you’ve been away from the classroom for a while, or it’s just one of many responsibilities you’ll be juggling, starting school can feel overwhelming. This ebook was created to help give you a head start on your path to school success.
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So you are starting on a different path of learning – an online course. Good for you! Just follow these 10 steps for school success.

1. **Recognize the purpose**

Locate the computer requirements document on the school website. Usually, these requirements can be found on the site’s student portal. If not, check the distance learning section of the site. Make sure your computer fits the requirements and you have the right peripherals (printer, speakers, microphone, etc.) and software (Adobe Acrobat to read .PDF files, Microsoft Word for writing papers, etc). Once you have those in place, make sure they all work!

*Hint: Most schools provide the software as downloads from their technical support page, so check that out before you buy software. Typically, but not always, such software is included in the price of tuition. If not, your school should offer a significant discount. If PDFs or ebooks are included, your professor will contact you before class begins.*

2. **Set aside a physical space where you “attend” class**

Before hitting the virtual books, make sure you’ve got all the basics you’ll need to create an environment that is study friendly. Establish a space in your home to keep your school stuff. A desk that can comfortably fit your computer, speakers, printer, and other materials is a good start. It is important to have a form of organization, even if it’s just two folders – a physical one for important papers and a folder on your computer where you store all your schoolwork. Put your books, some blank paper, a pen, and a highlighter all in one place. For more on setting up a home workspace, read the **Home Office** section below.
3. **Know the school landscape**

Just as if you were walking around a new campus, you’ll want to “walk” around your virtual campus so you can learn where things are. Log into the school website with your assigned login and password as soon as possible. Click on different links to see what’s available and get a feel for your school. Find where your professor has stored course material such as the syllabus, assignments, and ebooks. Locate the discussion boards and chat areas for when you need to participate in class discussions. Also, determine if you can access school email from the classroom website or if it’s in a separate area. Finally, look out for a virtual student lounge, which some schools offer as a way for students to connect and get to know one another.

*Hint: Most schools hide important student information behind a firewall to protect you, so you will need to have a login and password to access it. Make sure you record your login info in a document or somewhere else you can refer to in case you forget it. Additionally, find out where the technical help desk is located.*

4. **Visit the bookstore**

Once you’ve logged on, locate the bookstore and order your books for your course(s). Some schools provide all required textbooks as free, downloadable ebooks. If your school does not provide this service, you can buy your books, often at a discount, from online stores such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and half.com.

*Hint: Sometimes it takes 10 days to get the book to you, so you want to secure your books right away.*

5. **Find the important offices and contact information**

Locate any offices you might need, such as the computer help desk, business office, advising office, the department your course is affiliated with, and the library. Lucky for you, you don’t have to learn about the dining halls since your own kitchen will be the dining hall (and snack bar!). Schools vary greatly in how their websites are laid out, but most provide easy-to-find links, links, numbers, and emails for all the services you will need as an online student.
6. Find out where your class is located

Find the login and password for your course and the directions for logging in. (Most of the time, your login and password for class will match your login and password for the school.)

*Hint: You don’t want to find yourself without this essential information when the help desk is unavailable and your first assignment is due, so make sure you can log in, even if you can’t yet access your course, so you know your set-up works.*

7. Learn the layout of the classroom

Check out the course website by logging into your course (or a demo course if your course is not available) and familiarizing yourself with the space. Think of it as a classroom. Click on all the links, visit the discussion board, the assignments page, the email system, and anything else you can access just as if you were checking out the physical space of a classroom. Every online course is built in a course management system (WebCT®, Blackboard®, Angel®, Desire2Learn®, Sakai™, are some popular ones; some schools have proprietary systems). It is to your advantage to learn how to navigate the course before you begin class.

*Hint: Nothing adds to frustration more than having to learn how to do something or where to find something when you face a deadline.*

8. Scope out the course

Find the syllabus and read it. This will give you an idea of what you are going to study, how much reading there will be, what kind of assignments you will be doing, and generally acquaint you with the professor’s expectations.

*Hint: Knowing what to expect will help keep you focused and not overwhelmed.*
9. **Post your introduction and find a friend**

Most online courses start by having the students write an introduction and posting it on the class discussion or bulletin board. It’s get acquainted time, so take advantage of it. Find someone in the class who you find interesting and send them a private email using their school email address. Let him know you like his posting and why. Keep it short and simple.

*Hint: Having a friend in an online class is important – you can compare notes, share thoughts and understandings of assignments, and be a little less alone in class.*

10. **Take a deep breath**

The first online learning experience can be a little intimidating for anyone, but once you get the hang of it, you will do fine. Colleges and universities spend lots of time and money developing online courses just so online students will have a great experience. Remember to ask questions, enjoy the experience and most of all, remember to relax and breathe!

*Hint: Deep breathing is one of the best ways to relax.*
HOW TO SET UP A HOME OFFICE FOR ONLINE LEARNING

A separate space devoted solely to your studies will help you concentrate and, more importantly, stay organized.

This area should be designated only for academic work and test taking. Keep it clutter-free and comfortable. A space designated for studying will help you focus and stay on task.

These steps will give you all you need to design and set-up a home office that’s perfect for online learning!

1. Find some space

If possible, try to dedicate an entire room to your new study space/home office. Consider creating a dual purpose room like a guest room/home office or setting up a home-office space in an unused portion of the house like the attic or basement. Make sure your room has a door that closes; this will help cut down on noise and interruptions. By identifying a specific area or room as your home office, it sends a clear message:

“When I am in here, I am doing schoolwork.”

2. Pick a quiet location

Road traffic is noisy, so try to pick a room that does not have a window facing a main thoroughfare. The kitchen is also a hotspot for noise (and full of temptations): clanging dishes and pans; cupboards swinging shut; the refrigerator door being opened and shut. You may not notice small or repetitive noises now, but when you are reviewing for an exam or drafting a 15-page paper, these little distractions can have a big impact on your ability to concentrate.
3. **Make it comfortable**

Select your working style: do you want to feel energized and upbeat when you are studying or would you prefer a feeling of tranquility and reflection? If you want a feeling of stimulation or activity, paint the walls warm yellows or chose red drapes for your window dressing. If you want serenity and calm, choose soothing, cool blue tones or deep, rich greens. If you want classic simplicity in your workspace, stick to taupe, grays and even chocolate-y browns. Do you like to stretch out while you take notes? Add some throw pillows or a beanbag. Don’t be afraid to add some personality, but make sure that each item will help you stay productive. Too many pillows and you may find yourself curled up next to your laptop, asleep!

4. **Choose appropriate furnishings and equipment**

To optimize your space, list all the items that must go into your home office. By doing this, you can plan the best layout for your room. Depending on the size of the space, you may need to take some measurements to ensure that everything will fit and that you won’t feel crowded or uncomfortable. Think about what you may need:

- A desk and chair
- Desktop or laptop computer with an Internet connection
- Printer, scanner, and/or fax
- Shelves for your books, binders, print-outs, and reference materials
- Filing cabinet(s)
- Floor lamps or desk lamps
- A bulletin/memo board to keep track of notes and other bits of information
- Calendar (online or offline) to track assignments due and test dates

5. **Prevent distractions**

Distractions are plentiful, especially if you are a parent. A message board on the door or outside of your home office will help with communication (especially with older children). Signs like “Studying until 7:30,” or “Preparing for exam at 8,” will tell your family members what to expect, and prevent any unnecessary questions or interruptions like, “What are you doing?” or “Are you going to be done soon?”
6. *Keep everything close at hand*

Have enough storage space to keep extras around. Items like: a dictionary or thesaurus, pens, pencils, notepad paper, printer paper, highlighters, 3-hole punch, stapler, book flags or sticky notes, etc.

7. *Lessen the noise*

The perfect room is one that is completely sound-proof, but that would probably require renovating! If noise is a problem, consider purchasing a white noise or sound machine. These machines produce sounds that drown out other distracting noises and can help keep you focused when you’re reading, posting to your discussion board, writing and studying. Music is another great way to block out unwelcomed sounds. Pick up a pair of noise-cancelling headphones and enjoy the soothing sounds of your favorite artists while you study.

8. *Maintain your study space*

A messy area leads to lost materials and misplaced notes. Give everything a designated area on your desk and shelves; keep your files up-to-date. Remove dirty dishes after using them so that they don’t pile up and consume precious space on your desk. By taking a few minutes every day to keep your work area neat and tidy, you can come home and start your work right away without searching for items or getting distracted by useless clutter.

9. *Use the room for studying*

Avoid the temptation to use your home office for other projects. If you enjoy crafting, building models, knitting or other crafts, do not bring them into your work area. Though these activities are great hobbies and smart stress-relievers, they will lure you away from your academic goals. Also, try to dissuade your children from using the space. It is okay to have a place you can call your own!

10. *Share space if you must*

Not everyone has space or an extra room in their home just for their studies. If you are studying in your living room, den or another shared space, be sure to communicate your needs to others. Maybe put up a sign that reads, “Quiet, please – Working,” or “Reserving the Living Room from 8 – 10 tonight.”
Now that you have your home office set up and you’re prepared for your first online class, it’s time to mentally and physically prepare yourself for the demands of the semester.

1. *Get sufficient rest*

   The notion that a good night’s rest is essential to functioning at your best is nothing new, yet studies show only 11 percent of college students get quality sleep. Ideally, a student should average nine hours of sleep per night. In reality, it’s easier said than done. Take the measures necessary to get as close to those nine hours as possible. For example, cut down on caffeine, organize your schedule so that you’re not pulling all-nighters to complete your assignments, exercise during the day, and turn off stimulants such as the television and computer at an earlier time.

2. *Eat right*

   In a study done over an 11 year period at Brinn College, it was shown that students who ate a balanced breakfast before taking a General Biology exam were more likely to perform better than those who skipped the meal altogether. Still, only 65.6 percent of those who participated ate breakfast. In addition to your three main meals, eat snacks in between, this way you’re never starving and can sustain focus. Also, lighter, healthier meals are a better option as something heavier will most likely tire you out.

3. *Exercise*

   Exercise is proven to help people think more clearly, reduce stress, and provide energy. These are all key factors to being a successful student. Plus, activity is a great way to unwind. Pick a time during the day to do an activity you like – whether it’s going to the gym, running, or playing tennis – and develop a routine. Or, if you have the time, join a league or activity group.
HEALTHY HINTS FOR AN ONLINE STUDENT

4. **Take care of your eyes**

Eyestrain is a common disorder in which an individual experiences discomfort while reading or looking at something. As an online student, between extended use of a computer screen and reading for long clips at a time, you can be more susceptible than others to this condition. Though eyestrain doesn’t have long-term consequences, it can make concentration difficult, lead to headaches, and can take days to go away. As a frequent computer user, take the following steps to reduce eyestrain:

- Position your computer monitor at least 20 inches from your eyes. If you find yourself moving closer to the screen to read smaller type, increase the font size. Make sure the top of the screen is at eye level or lower so that you’re looking down slightly at the screen.

- Adjust your monitor so that the room’s brightest light sources are off to the side. Instead of using overhead lighting, consider an adjustable desk lamp. Shut blinds and shades and avoid placing your monitor in front of a window. Also, adjust the contrast and brightness on your monitor so that the font is easy to read.

- Wipe your monitor screen regularly as dust on the screen can contribute to glare and reflection issues.

- Position your keyboard in front of your monitor as placing it to the side will cause your eyes to focus from different distances, which is tiring.

- Take eye breaks throughout the day. Every 20 minutes, focus your eyes away from the screen and look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds.

5. **Limit caffeine**

While caffeine is a stimulant and can help you concentrate, too much can cause insomnia, nervousness, and irritability. None of these symptoms are conducive to studying. If you do drink coffee, for example, try to limit it between two and four cups a day.
HEALTHY HINTS FOR AN ONLINE STUDENT

6. *Stay hydrated*

Your brain’s ability to function can be severely affected by dehydration. Though it only represents two percent of body weight, it only takes a one percent of body weight loss for an individual to feel less alert and lose concentration. Generally speaking, doctors advise the average, healthy woman to drink nine cups of water a day and the equivalent man to drink 13.

7. *Stretch*

The longer you sit at your desk without any standing or stretching breaks, the greater risk you have of developing muscle stiffness, neck, arm, wrist, back, and leg strain, and muscle tension. Taking five-minute stretching breaks every half hour or hour can significantly reduce injury. The following exercises can be performed without leaving your work area:

- Neck Stretches
- Shoulder/Arm Stretches
- Hand/Wrist stretches
- Leg Lifts

8. *Take a break*

On average, the normal human attention span is only 10-12 minutes. Ideally, we should take mental (as well as stretching) breaks every 15 minutes. When you find yourself drifting, get up and take a quick walk, have a drink of water, and enjoy a brief mental timeout.

You now know how to get started on your path as a successful online student. The time has come to find the program that best fits your needs. **Get started today!**