Academic Skills: Online Courses

Online learning is different from traditional, in-person classes. There are a number of things to consider when participating in and studying for online courses. Here are some tips to help you get the most out of online learning.

Know your professor's expectations.

In online courses, as with any type of course, it's important to know what your professor expects of you. This will help you plan your time and reduce feelings of anxiety.

Ask your professor:

- **How frequently should I be posting on discussion threads?** Many online courses have discussion threads where students participate by writing and responding to posts. In most online courses, it's good to find a balance between posting and responding to your fellow students. Find out how many of each type of post your professor expects.
- **How long should discussion posts be?** Most online posts in academic environments are approximately 200 words, but not all Faculties follow the same guidelines for posts.

Writing Posts: Conventions

- Use posts to demonstrate your academic writing. Use standard grammatical forms, punctuation and capitalization. Do not use slang or social abbreviations (i.e. LOL) unless necessary for your course content.
- Support your ideas with scholarly sources. Show off that you have done your reading!
- Incorporate additional reading as appropriate. Be curious and examine the course content from different angles.
- Cite your sources using the format indicated by your professor (i.e. MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). Use in-text citations and include a mini bibliography at the end of each post.

Writing Posts: Responding to your peers

- When you are responding to your peers, try to build on their ideas:
  - Put ideas into perspective by connecting them to personal experiences, current events in society and/or scholarly research.
  - Analyze ideas by comparing and contrasting with course content. Your peers may have points that differ from those discussed in readings and course content. You can discuss these differences to help everyone better understand the core concepts.
  - Evaluate your peers' ideas by highlighting the strengths in their arguments. If you point out weaknesses, make sure to stay respectful and use scholarly sources to highlight nuances that will be useful for everyone's learning.
  - Elaborate on ideas by providing sources to bring up a new point or add a new perspective.

Remember: A discussion thread is an environment for idea sharing and critical thinking, not emotionally charged, back-and-forth arguments.

Writing Posts: The composition process

- Write your posts on Microsoft Word first.
- Revise for clarity and remember to be concise. Use the word count tool to help trim unnecessary details.
- Revise for organization and structure. Make sure each paragraph has a topic sentence and supporting sentences that are well-connected to the topic. If you want to share a new thought, start a new paragraph.

Getting Work Done: Good habits

- Block off times to work on each course. Make a timetable and stick to it.
- Stay connected to your fellow classmates. You can ask your professor to set up an informal thread on Avenue to Learn for chatting and peer-to-peer support.
- Ask your professor to set up a discussion thread for questions to avoid information overload via email. Remember, it's easy to misinterpret course content and expectations, so ask for clarification whenever necessary.