



# Chapter 3 Studying Online

Student Orientation  
Guide  
WebCT 4.0

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## Introduction

It's estimated that over 6 million students are using WebCT to study online worldwide\*.

This does not even include the number of students who are using other online course delivery products from other software developers.

Many institutions have also created their own propriety online course delivery systems, and it is almost impossible to say how many students are studying online around the globe.

So what is all the fuss about? Why are millions of students around the world using the Internet and the Web to study online?

## Why do people study online?

Below is a list of possible reasons:

### *Convenience*

Some students would rather take a course online as it means that they never have to brave rush hour traffic, or pay for parking bills/tickets. Hopping onto the Information Super Highway is as easy as 1-2-3 (once you have it all set up!).

### *Cost*



The cost of travelling, or residence near an institution, can be the last nail in the coffin for you financially! Bear in mind that because courses are available online, it does not mean that they will be cheaper! It actually takes more time and money to develop an online course than a course that is delivered face to face. You will save money, taking the following into consideration; travelling, accommodation, food bills, wear and tear on your motor vehicle. Lastly, you could save by being able to work in the day and study during the evenings, so this means you could possibly not have a loss of income while you study.

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\* Source: WebCT, March 2000.

## ***Prestige***

Some students study online because the institution offering the course has a lot of prestige in a certain subject discipline. Having a Masters from XYZ University on your CV could get a student a better job, with a higher salary.

## ***Accessibility***



Some students are physically disabled and taking a course online is therefore more convenient for them. Other students are unable to attend a live lecture every day due to transport or financial constraints.

## ***Flexible learning requirements***

Some students, taking an online course, are actually Moms or Dads at the same time, and therefore cannot attend a class every day due to family commitments. The hour or two after the kids go to bed is the best time for them to tackle their studies.

## ***Updating ones skills, whilst working at the same time***

Full time workers are able to take a course online while they still work their 8-hour day. They may need to update their skills due to government regulatory requirements, or simply to learn more to produce more, and earn more.

## ***Required participation as part of a campus based attended degree/diploma***

Most online courses today are of this nature. The student attends a live lecture a few times a week, but is also required to supplement their studying by taking the balance of the course online.

## ***Conclusion***

The list could go on and on, giving more and more reasons why students take courses online.

The fact is: Millions of students are all studying online for a lot of different reasons.

## What skills do you need?

While the reasons for studying online are all very different, most online students share a lot in common as far as the required skills they would need to study online.

Different courses use different levels of technology, but all students studying online need to have some basic to intermediate skills:

These skills are divided into two areas:

- Techno skills
- Online studying skills. (These are non-techno orientated skills, and have everything to do with who you are, and how you can best learn online.)

Let us briefly look at the skills you would require.

### *Techno skills*



These skills include knowing: How you would use an Internet Browser? How you would send and receive email? How could you add an attachment to an email?

If you are new to the Web and Internet, you will find, included in this manual, a whole section about the Internet, Web and the skills and knowledge required to use these tools. You will also find a host of tips and quick reference guides with information to help you get the most out of the experience, in as little time as possible.

### *Online studying skills*



If the truth be known, most students know a lot about their own studying skills. As a student you would know more about your own perceptions about studying than anybody could ever tell you. You already know your own strengths and weaknesses. The important point being -- if you know your own studying weaknesses it is already a strength.

Some students like to study one hour before a test, some students prefer to study three weeks in advance, whilst other prefer not to study at all and try to desperately wing themselves through the course.

In the section that follows, we are not going to focus on how you can study, or memorise information in a better way, but rather what the real issues you should be aware of before you study online.

Studying online is a whole new ball game for students. It can be a very exciting, yet challenging experience all at once. Even if you have all the techno skills, you still need to be aware of the potential pitfalls studying online can present.

## Different classes of online students

- Some students who take an online course will never ever see the institutional campus, other than an image on a website.
- Some students studying online will study at a Virtual University/College that actually has no campus at all. The virtual institution may work from a basement in New York with lots of high tech equipment that drives the whole process.
- Students may also take a course online and attend face-to-face lectures at the same time. The students may attend lectures two days a week on the campus and be online 3 days a week. It will all depend on how the institutions and department has set up the course and what the requirements are.

The skills and knowledge required to study online are perhaps even more demanding than attending a live lecture based course at your local campus.

In a live class situation, where there are many classmates in the same class, it's easy to pretend that you are listening, or that you are concentrating on the lecture without doing much at all.



But with regard to studying online, if you provide no input into discussions, if you only view small portions of the content online, this can all be very easily noticed by your online instructor. So, if you are taking a course online you will be expected to participate more in the activities of the virtual classroom. Don't expect to participate less than in a live class.

## Asynchronous communication

One of the tools most commonly used in an online course is the Discussion tool. The Discussion tool is a great way of sharing thoughts and experiences with fellow classmates online, without having to worry about the restrictions of time. It's a delayed form of communication that fits well into busy schedules.

Often in a live class situation you may have questions to ask when the lecture is over, and you already need to move on to the next class. With studying online, and using the Discussion tool, you can discuss and ask questions long after the class has ended. In the academic world this is known as, asynchronous communication. This simply means that you can be a part of an online conversation when it suits you best because the communication does not occur at the same time. You are not bound to attending the class at a particular time. The benefit of asynchronous communication is that you have more time to think about how to respond to a question.

## Synchronous communication

Synchronous communication, on the other hand, occurs at the same time. The tool used to do this in WebCT is normally the Chat Room. Here the lecturer and students all log onto the server at the same time, and all hold a virtual chat over the Internet all at once. It's a fixed time meeting scenario and you would all need to go online at the same time to take part.

Your online instructor will give you an overview of exactly what is expected of you in your online class.

They will tell you when you need to be online, and how much time you are expected to devote to the course per week.

So what is it about online learning that you need to know, so that you can realistically create a mental framework of what is required of you? What kind of support mechanisms can you provide for yourself while you complete the course? How can you be better prepared?

What can you expect? How can you motivate yourself to complete the course?

Glad you asked all these questions! Below is a list of ideas that we will discuss in some detail.

## How to study online effectively

Twenty-five of the most important considerations in being a successful online student that you could ever read.

Most considerations discussed below originated from past students' experiences. These online learning pointers will really help you avoid some of the learning curves you could experience that could cause you to drop out of the course. So be sure to read them all.

## ***Be honest with yourself!***

If you are studying online, you really have to be honest with yourself. Are you a self-motivated conscientious student; are you a disciplined well-rounded student? I bet that most of you reading this actually are not. The fact is not many are, and that no student is perfect.

You should already know your own studying strengths and weaknesses! The challenge is not denial; the challenge is learning how to motivate yourself to do the work!

You will get some motivation from your fellow students and your online lecturer, but in the end you need to motivate yourself.

Set rewards for yourself e.g. after completing X project, reward yourself with X reward.

## ***Don't waste money! Are you really ready to study online?***



Someone is paying for the course, either you are paying or possibly a family member is paying for the course. Or it's through a bank loan you have secured. Either way, you will have to repay the loan. If you can see that you are heading for a busy time of your life i.e. over Christmas, Thanksgiving, it's probably not a good idea to enroll in a course.

Can you postpone the course? Look at your life and try to see where it's going over the next six months. While we all cannot gaze in a crystal ball, you should be able to have some idea about what you will be doing over the next few months.

## ***Learn to balance your time***

All of us have to learn to balance our time between what we have to do and what we want to do.

If you spend your life only doing the things that you like to do, you could end up not liking the things you like to do.

The regret of lack of discipline is far greater than the regret of work completed!

## ***Start with a mouthful!***



Because some courses never require you to attend a live lecture, it will be very easy to procrastinate. The best way to start off with work is to set a goal for yourself, make a list of to do's, what's the most important aspect you need to finish?

Even if you think you can't finish the task on time, and you have left it too late, start with one paragraph, maybe even one email to a fellow student to get your mind off things -- let them know you are taking strain!

## ***Romance your soul***

Often a little change in environment can change a mood or attitude. How about some soft music in the background while you send a message to your instructor?

Maybe you should move your desk and computer to another room? Maybe you should move away from the television (unless this is how you are taking your course online). Maybe you should have a break and get back on the Internet next week.

## ***Get out of the rut***

Maybe you should go to an Internet café and read your email from a totally new environment. Maybe you can go to a bookstore where they offer cappuccinos and free access to email? Maybe your Dad's boss does not mind you coming in once a week and hanging around on the Internet? Maybe these are the type of questions you need to ask yourself so that you learn to evaluate your own moods to see what is affecting you, and how best you can cope with it, AND how you can complete your course deadlines!

Being on the Internet is like being on a highway on the middle isle, with traffic blazing past you all the time in all directions. Except, you do not have any sense of the traffic around you, audibly or visually. The Web is a hectic place and yet if you spend too much time on it, you can feel isolated and estranged from life.

Maybe this means nothing to you now, but when you are half way through the semester, and you feel like packing the course in, it may be a good option to change your surroundings for a while.

## ***Develop a relationship with your lecturer/online instructor***

For many students this is a totally daunting request! "You mean, make friends with the lecturer?"

That's right, here's why we suggest this: sometimes in life everything goes wrong! If you have built up a relationship of trust with your lecturer then they "should" be understanding. If you have forever had a list of excuses, and you always handed in projects late, guess what? You will find yourself up a creek without a paddle.

## ***Beware, they are watching you!***

Modern technology has done potential wonders for education. If you are taking a course online using WebCT, guess what? The Instructor can draw up a profile of how you are doing online. They can see how many pages you have accessed, how much time you have spent online and how many times you have posted a message to the Discussion tool. (If you are reading this then it means they have cleared me to say this and they don't mind you knowing about this!)



What I am trying to say is, if you get straight A's for all the courses, and you've never posted a message, or looked at a page for more than a few seconds, the online lecturer will get suspicious.

Also, by building up a good online attendance profile, you will gain respect from the online instructor, as this shows that you are interested in the course and that you are motivated to learn.

Instructors are human! They help those who help themselves! Get what I mean?

## ***Prevention is better than cure!***



If there is ever a time in life to get organised, it's the time before you get totally involved in an online course.

Do you have the following information?

- Your ISP support telephone number, if you need support and possibly their server is down.

- Do you know what the procedure is, if you have finished an assignment, and you can't get online to hand it in, i.e. what allowances will the online instructor give you?
- Do you have a floppy disk on hand so that if your computer cannot access the Net, for whatever reason, that you can copy your assignment onto a disk and take it to someone's computer to send it online?
- Have you written down a list of support telephone numbers for students, at the institution you are studying through?
- Did you put the piece of paper with the above information in a safe place where the cat cannot get it?

### ***How much time is required per week to take the course online?***

Your online instructor should be able to give you a good idea of how much time you can expect to spend while you are busy with your online course. You should then be able to identify how much time you will need each week to complete the course. Find out how much time is required of you to complete the course week by week.

### ***Buy a new calendar!***

Your online instructor should also provide you with a list of dates for the whole course, also known as a semester calendar. As part of the course you will be expected to achieve certain milestones as time goes on, i.e. assignments, quizzes etc. Once you get this information write it on the calendar and put the calendar in a place where you will often see it, and then when you don't notice it anymore move it to another place!

If the instructor cannot provide you with this information then make up your own calendar with the necessary deadlines and important dates.

### ***Patience is a virtue!***

Try to remember that the online instructor has a life apart from your course. By this I mean, if you email the instructor on a Saturday morning, don't expect an answer within 24 hours! Some instructors will respond to email once a day seven days a week. If a class of 25 emails the instructor with a question, the instructor could take a while to get back to you.

## ***How to get noticed fast!***



Believe it or not the instructor does not know everything. At times you may have a very useful tip or suggestion to share with the class. Don't sit on it. You don't have to email the whole class; if the instructor feels that it's a good idea, the instructor will tell the class.

Also, if one of the students in your course is struggling with a particular issue, help them -- whether it is techno or subject related. Your fellow student would appreciate the help, and so will the online instructor.

## ***Words can be like FLAMES!***



Be careful to always address your fellow students and online instructor with respect.

Foul language would never be tolerated by an instructor, so do be careful if you suddenly see your hotheaded fingers typing furiously!

If you are really upset about something someone has said to you, and it was read by others online, take time to carefully think how you would respond. Try and respond the next morning rather than within the same hour of you having received the torrid email or message.

## ***Time management***

If you can plan for 10 minutes a day, you can plan for an hour, if you can plan for an hour you can plan for a day, if you can plan for a day you can plan the next and the next and the next day.

It is good to plan your time, so that you can dedicate specific time in a day to devote to your studies.

But remember (here's a real benefit of online learning), you can respond to an email, or type up a question while you watch your favourite sports game on television.

Structuring your time is a good idea, but sometimes we structure our lives so much that it feels not worth the effort. Learn to distinguish between tasks that require your full attention and tasks that require less attention.

It's a good idea to set time aside, about thirty minutes at a time, especially if you need to really concentrate on what you are studying.

### ***You can still raise your hand***



Actually, if you raise your hand while you are online nobody will notice you. But remember, if you get stuck, ask questions -- even if you ask a fellow student. In an online course environment "Communication and Content is King"! The lecturer will provide the content (subject matter or material) to a large degree, but it really is the student's responsibility to get the communication going. The Internet does not equip online instructors with crystal balls that let them see what you are thinking (that will only happen by 2020 and then your course would be long completed!).

There is always a high level of probability that the question you have is also a question other students have in the same class. Once the online instructor has answered the question, your fellow students will remember who asked the question and appreciate your effort for asking the question in the first place. Student comradely is no new science!

### ***Make a copy of your semester work guideline***

It's pretty handy to keep a copy of the important dates and activities about your course with you all the time. You could put it in your bag, briefcase or pin it up at work.

It always serves as a good reminder for you. Be sure to highlight the activities of the course once they are completed, it will give you a good sense of satisfaction to see what you have completed in relation to what you still need to do.

### ***Get to class early***

If your online instructor has scheduled specific time for you to meet online to have a group online chat, make sure that you log on and sort any potential difficulties out before the class begins. Foresight is better than hindsight.

## ***Be open minded***

In an online course you need to understand that the more open minded you are about your view of life and work, the better the other students will get to know you, and the better you can get to know others. Bear in mind that in some online course environments you may never ever see the other students face to face. By being open and friendly you could find yourself settling in and making friends pretty quickly.

## ***Cyber grammar skills***



It would be a good idea to brush up on your spelling, punctuation and grammar. It is always a good idea to invest in a handy dictionary so that you can refer to it if you have any doubt. It might be also worth your while stopping over at an online bookstore and purchasing a book on how to write effective email.

Included in this manual (see Chapter 2) is a list of smiley's, or emoticons that you can use to express yourself better in any online communication environment. In an online course the readers are not able to see your smiles, winks or grins to understand you completely. Smiley's will help you get your true message across.

In a virtual classroom nearly all communication is written, so it is really critical that you feel comfortable with expressing yourself while using a keyboard.

Be sure to spell check before you send the email, and always proof read any text before you send it off.

Most online courses will have a very high degree of text-based material for you to read. A good idea would be to invest in a quality printer. This way you would be able to read much of the material on paper as opposed to on screen. Reading on screen can be more trying than reading on paper. Besides, reading on paper means you can read the material wherever you like.

## ***Falling behind***

Be very careful of this. Falling behind in an online classroom could make it impossible to catch up. You need to stick to a timetable of studying and interaction. If the class moves onto another subject, and you have not really grasped the concepts of the first discussion, it's really difficult to catch up.

## ***Team projects***

In an online classroom you would often be expected to work in project teams to gain valuable course grades.

This means that you need to play your part, and gain the respect of your peers as soon as you can.

In some online courses you may never see the other students, so the only impression they will get from you is the quality of work you can contribute. If a crisis occurs in your life, during a critical phase of the project, your team will look out for you if you have been contributing your fair share of work. If you do not pull your weight through the project, then you could find yourself being ostracised by the team, and not taken seriously when you really need help.

## ***Don't feel shy to ask for help***

If you experience technical problems, and you don't ask for help, it is almost impossible for the online instructor to know that you are experiencing problems. Weeks could go by without them knowing what has happened to you. Some institutions have a support, or help desk, that could help you out. Find out where you could get help before you have the problems, because you will experience problems at some point.

## ***Tune your browser***



It's important that you find out exactly the requirements of the course you are taking online, in terms of your Browser capabilities. Most online courses will require Java and JavaScript. You would also have to set your cache to reload every time a page is displayed.

## ***Don't forget the trusty fax machine***

If you need to communicate with your instructor that you are having technical or other problems, remember that sending a fax would not cost you too much in the way of time and money.

## Conclusion

The Internet, as we know it today, has really only been around for about 7 years or so. In terms of worldwide adoption, and prolific use of the Internet, the Internet is still a new phenomenon.

Online learning is even newer as it was one of the branches of the Internet that developed a few years after the Internet became so popular.

So, with this in mind, realise that standards are still evolving and nobody knows it all. The fact is nobody needs to know it all. There are sites now available all over the Web that you can learn about almost anything you wish ([www.ehow.com](http://www.ehow.com) is a good example).

Information is now more readily accessible than ever before, for those who have access to the Internet.

Not only is this a very trying and interesting time for students, lecturers from around the world are also having to learn about the new opportunities that the Internet can offer as far as online education is concerned.

The chances are that the online lecturers you will be dealing with have only learnt what they know now in the last few years, if not the past twelve months.

Lecturers and students from around the world are all facing learning curves at the same time. You are not alone, and the chances are that your online instructor will be far more understanding of the potential problems that can arise during an online course than in a face-to-face course.

With this in mind, don't be nervous to ever ask for help, everyone is still learning and you will find many people who are more than willing to help you as best as they can.

