

Introduction to Online Learning: A Guide for Students

3 Getting Organized

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Book Title: Introduction to Online Learning: A Guide for Students

Chapter Title: "3 Getting Organized"

Pub. Date: 2010

Access Date: February 01, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412978224

Online ISBN: 9781452226491

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226491.n3>

Print pages: 29-44

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226491.n3>

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3 Getting Organized

Introduction

Online courses offer students flexibility and convenience. Even as students work to meet deadlines, they also largely get to determine where and when to complete their coursework. There is great freedom inherent to this format, but the reduction or elimination of face-to-face meetings can make it “far too easy for [students] to put off studying for their online courses.”¹ This places the responsibility on students to figure out where and when they work best, and to allocate sufficient time to their studies. Since completing work for online courses can actually take more time each week than traditional courses, and online students are likely to be juggling a number of other obligations, this task may initially seem quite daunting. Fortunately, a number of steps can be taken to most efficiently balance coursework with other life responsibilities. This chapter provides ideas for how to organize school materials, locate suitable workspaces, and find ways to mold your coursework around other obligations. By the end of this chapter, you should have a good feel for how to most effectively complete your studies.

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Getting Organized

Settling into a nice coffee shop with an interesting textbook may sound like a good way to study, but the scenario may lose some appeal if preceded by a half-hour frantic search for that textbook, and another few minutes of hunting around for a notepad and working pen, only to get to the coffee shop and realize that you have forgotten to pack muchneeded highlighters. Organization can be difficult for online students as they

often study “on the go.” Many online students also split their time and attention among many responsibilities, which may add to the challenge of staying organized. Without a sustainable strategy, countless hours may be spent simply finding what is needed to study. Your time is valuable; as such, this section sets forth some easy-to-follow ideas for preventing wasted hours.

Organization in the Home

As you prepare for your classes, you are likely to obtain a number of school-related materials—anything from computers to staples, binders to flash drives. While students have widely diverse living conditions and study habits, the one universal principle for staying organized is simply this: Keep all of your school-related materials in one location. For most students, this will be a dedicated office area centered on their home computer. Still, even those who study “on the go” should establish a “home base” for school-related items. While not ideal, if space is at a premium, this location may be as simple as a dedicated crate that can be slid under a table, or a wall-mounted shelf.

If you always know where to go when you need something for school, it will save time that might otherwise be lost digging through drawers or running from room to room in search of an item. Even those who don't have the time to file materials neatly every day will benefit from taking a moment to return materials to home base when they are done using them. Done consistently, this will limit setup time and maximize actual study time.

Take some time to brainstorm about the items that would be useful to have on-hand to support your studies, such as the following:

- Textbooks, school notes, and other academic materials
- A flash drive, backup hard drive, or some other device to back up electronic files
- A calendar to help you keep track of due dates and other responsibilities
- Basic office supplies, such as working pens, highlighters, paper, and a stapler
- Binders, folders, or other organizational tools for your notes and printed materials

- Index cards or other study aids

While simply keeping materials in a centralized location will go a long way in saving time, more refined organizational strategies are encouraged, especially if you are managing a heavy course load. Some students may work best with hanging files in a file cabinet; others may prefer to maintain a folder or binder for each class. Select the organizational style that appeals to you the most, and stick to it.

Learning Tip: Keep all of your school-related materials in one place.

On-the-Road Study Pack

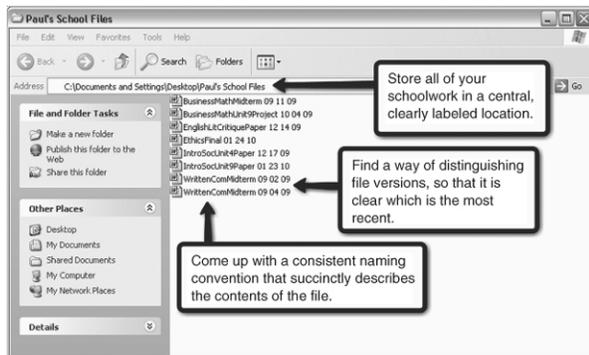
Even with a properly maintained “home base,” those who prefer to work away from home may find themselves occasionally reaching their study destination only to discover that they have forgotten some key item. If you travel frequently or simply prefer not to work at home, keep a bag pre-packed with some basic office supplies, such as pens, paper, a USB drive, and any other tools that may aid your efficiency. Also pack items for your comfort, such as facial tissue or a few dollars for incidentals while you are studying. If there are items that will be unpacked between study trips, such as a laptop and charger, keep a checklist in the bag that you can run through before you leave home to make sure that nothing is forgotten. If you find yourself at your destination wishing that you had brought an item that was not on your list, add it right away so that you can be better prepared next time.

Electronic Organization

Organizing electronic files on your computer is as important as, if not more so than, organizing hard-copy study materials. Store your school-related electronic files in a centralized area so that you know where to find them when needed. Make sure that your file names are appropriately descriptive of their content. It is not unusual for students to first apply file names such as “paper” to their schoolwork; as they accumulate more files, [p. 32 ↓] they end up investing time in trying to figure out

whether “paper1” or “paper” is the file that they need, or which file is the latest draft of their work. One possible naming convention is to include the name of your course and the specific assignment in each file name, such as “Chemistry101 Midterm.” If you like to save multiple versions of your work as you make revisions, integrate the date of the draft as well: “Chemistry101 Midterm 10 23 09.” Dating your drafts helps you avoid losing track of whether your most recent file was “new draft,” “new new draft,” or “draft 2!”

Figure 3.1 An Organized Computer Folder



Where to Find the Space

Once you have some idea as to how your study materials will be organized, there still remains the task of figuring out where to study. Some people work quite well at home, sitting on the couch or settling into a home office. Others may find it difficult to concentrate at home and prefer to go elsewhere to study. This section walks through a four-step process to identify work spaces that match your needs and preferences:

- Brainstorm
- Assess
- Experiment
- Reflect and Adjust

Step 1: Brainstorm

When first working to identify suitable study locations, compile a comprehensive list of possibilities. Make a list of various rooms in your home and different areas in the community that can be easily accessed. Even students who like the structure of studying in the same place may sometimes need to turn to a “plan B” if there is a temporary Internet outage or a conflict over space with roommates or family members. Others may want to alternate work locations frequently to stay motivated, as they may feel stymied if they need to sit at the same desk day after day. Some students may prefer to vary locations by the type of task that needs to be completed; for example, they may read well at a library but prefer to complete other school assignments at home.

Since the goal at this stage is to come up with as many work areas as possible, think about the buildings that you may pass each day, such as libraries, restaurants, or coffee shops. Just about any place with a seating area is a potential location for studying. This author once had difficulty finding Internet access while spending the summer in a small town, only to find that a local gas station with restaurant-style booths also offered free wireless Internet for customers. Since the gas station was open 24/7, it turned out to be an ideal study situation. Don't rule out any possibilities at this stage.

The only cautionary note: While it may be tempting to check into your online classroom if you have a computer at work, please discuss this with your supervisor before doing so. Find out whether it is acceptable to study during down time, or during your breaks or after hours. If your employer is agreeable, you may find your workplace to be a good place to get coursework done, and it should be included on your list of possible study locations. If not, please find other ways of managing your studies. Many employers have strict policies regarding the use of their technology, and they may be able to monitor which sites you visit from your computer. As tempting as it may be to bend the rules, it isn't likely to be worth the risk of the loss of your employment.

Learning Tip: Secure your employer's approval before using work resources for your schooling.

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Step 2: Assess

Once you have identified a wide array of possible study locations, it is time to more critically evaluate which of your options will be most conducive to productivity. You may have a nice dining room table with good lighting that would seem to be perfect for studying, but if it is located in a high-traffic area of your household, it may be difficult to concentrate. Consider the following dimensions:

- **Comfort**—Consider lighting, temperature, noise level, and comfortable seating.
- **Accessibility**—Can you be there during the hours that you work best?
- **Affordability**—Is there any cost associated with the location?
- **Technology**—Is this a location that will enable work on the computer?

If a particular location is appealing to you but you have concerns about some aspect of the environment, consider whether that aspect is within your control. If you find libraries too quiet, an MP3 player may provide a simple solution. If you are distracted by poor temperature control in a particular room of your home, you may not be able to buy new windows or invest in new insulation, but you could arrange to keep a sweater or sweatshirt nearby if things are too cold, or buy an inexpensive fan and keep a beverage cooler on-hand if the room is too warm. Minor adjustments can go a long way!

Step 3: Experiment

Once you have settled on a handful of desirable work areas, consider spending some time trying to work in each of the most viable locations. If you prefer to work from a stable location, then you may quickly settle on a home workspace; still, it may be worth trying another location or two so that you have some comparison of where you are best able to concentrate. For those who feel stifled by the idea of sitting at a desk for hours, engage in a bit of trial-and-error to find out what does foster your productivity. Focus on

what feels right to you, rather than forcing yourself to work where you feel you “should” in order to be successful. Some prefer a desk, whereas others work better when they are able to sit on the floor and spread their work around, or settle into a comfortable chair with their book or laptop.

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Step 4: Reflect and Adjust

As you try each work area, take some time to reflect on how well you are able to concentrate in each location, and pay attention to the aspects of each environment that have been distracting. Keep in mind that sometimes preferred work conditions will not actually be the most conducive to productivity; for example, some may want to take advantage of the freedom of online learning by working with the radio or television on in the background, even though they consistently get little done while doing so. Remember, the more you can focus on your work, the less time that it will take to complete, so be quick to make adjustments where you notice that you aren't working at your optimum.

Learning Tip: Reflect realistically on how productive you are in different work spaces, and adjust your habits accordingly.

Special Considerations when Working at Home

Many students will end up doing much of their studying at home, as the home is, theoretically, easy to access and available 24/7. Still, there may be some limitations to when and exactly where you are able to “set up office.” The factors that you should consider include the following:

- Internet connection
- Available space

- Comfort
- Household patterns of use

Internet Connection

When determining where to set up a workspace, keep in mind the limitations set by your Internet connection. While you will spend some time studying materials or working on assignments that may not necessitate being online, much of your work is likely to take place on the Internet. Depending upon whether you have a dial-up, DSL, or cable connection, you may be limited to setting up your computer near a phone outlet or cable hook-up. If the location of your phone or cable connection is a high-traffic area of your home or otherwise unsuitable for productivity, you might consider investing in a wireless network so [p. 36 ↓] that you have more freedom regarding where you can do your computer work.

A wireless network allows individuals to access the Internet from within a certain range of a wireless router without having to plug the computer directly into the phone line or cable line. Three things are needed to have a wireless network in the home: Internet service, a wireless router, and a computer with “wi-fi” (wireless) capability. The Internet connection (phone or cable line) plugs into the wireless router instead of directly into the computer. The router acts much like the base unit of a cordless phone; it converts information that comes through the lines into a wireless radio signal that can be read by wi-fi compatible computers that are within a certain range of the device.

Most laptops now come with wi-fi capabilities built in. Setting up a wi-fi connection at home for use with a laptop can provide you with more freedom to work from where you feel most comfortable. A wireless connection can be useful for a desktop computer, as it gives you more freedom regarding where to situate your workspace. Having a wireless-enabled laptop also allows you to take advantage of any “wi-fi hot spots” around your community. (See the section on working away from home for more information on “hot spots.”) If you are using an older laptop or desktop, adapters are available to enable wireless capabilities.

Available Space

The location that you choose as your primary work area in the home should have enough space for basic office supplies and some way of keeping textbooks, files, and binders on-hand and organized. If you do have a wireless network, identify a location in your home that will allow sufficient space for these materials while also being away from high-traffic areas to minimize distractions when you are trying to concentrate.

Comfort

Consider the level of motivation that you will have in going to a particular room to study. The author of this book once designated the smallest room in the house as a “home office,” only to be continually drawn to a different room that had greater aesthetic appeal (and a fireplace). Try to situate yourself in a location that you will enjoy, or, if your household situation necessitates otherwise, take steps to increase the appeal of the area where you will be working.

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Household Patterns of Use

In assessing the suitability of your workspace, be realistic regarding when other members of the household may need to use that space, and whether those needs are in conflict with your study schedule. Conflicts over the use of the room or a shared home computer can be avoided by setting up a household schedule. Consider allocating the use of space for different purposes at different times, or arrange your schedule so that you are working while others are sleeping or away from home. If you find yourself having difficulty concentrating on your studies when others are home, don't give up—get creative! Many online students have reported using the bathroom to study; they may choose to complete their assigned readings while taking a bath or simply sit on the floor with a textbook or their laptop and enjoy the refuge that they find behind a locked door.

Finding an Office in the Community

Some students prefer to exploit the flexibility of online courses by “taking it on the road.” The criteria for assessing public study locations are similar to those that might be used in finding a workspace in the home, though the context is a bit different.

Is the work area easily accessible? Consider first whether a given location will be available during the hours that you would prefer to study. Some students sign up for online courses with the assumption that they can complete coursework at the local library, only to discover that the library is closed during the hours that they need to study. Others are quite pleased to discover local restaurants that are open into the late hours of the night and welcoming of students who settle into a booth for a few hours with a book or laptop so long as they order a cup of coffee or some other menu item.

Does the work area offer Internet access? Since online coursework inherently necessitates an Internet connection to complete at least some tasks, if you own a wi-fi enabled laptop take some time to inquire with local libraries, coffee shops, and bookstores to see whether they offer wireless Internet. This knowledge will be useful even if you have Internet service at home; many have been grateful for the connections available at local libraries or coffee shops when they experience an Internet outage or simply need a change of environment to maintain their motivation. Since not all businesses will advertise their wireless connection, it may be worthwhile to call them directly—this author [p. 38 ↓] relied on the wireless Internet connection set up for customers at a local restaurant for a good part of a year, which she only learned of from speaking to a waitress. As you investigate potential “wi-fi hot spots,” be aware that not all of them will provide free connections. Some will charge users a fee by the minute, hour, or day. When users first attempt to access the Internet in these locations, they encounter a screen that requires the entry of credit card information before they can proceed to access other Internet sites.

While computer and Internet access are important in looking at the “big picture” in online courses, a potential work area should not be ruled out solely because of a lack of Internet access. For those who have hard-copy textbooks or print their e-books or other online materials, reading can be done from anywhere; in fact, many people

spend so much time online that they may prefer to complete readings in an area that does not have a computer. This is where areas such as a yard, porch, or deck might come in handy, particularly for those who live in areas with nice climates or those who have “cabin fever” after spending cold months indoors. For students who are fortunate enough to be able to afford a laptop and a wireless broadband card (discussed in Chapter 2), even online work might be taken to the great outdoors.

Is the work area comfortable enough to facilitate your productivity? Pay attention to the feel of the work environments that you try. Students may believe that they have found a good work environment, failing to realize how significantly they are distracted by seemingly minor details. Motivation to work may be influenced by “environmental elements such as quiet, heat, and/or light.”² A location that has too much background noise, or one that is too silent, may interfere with productivity. It is easy to be distracted by temperatures that are too warm or too cold. This is where the self-reflection comes in; it is important to identify barriers to productivity so that they might be addressed, either through minor adjustments to work habits—bringing headphones to a work location that is otherwise too silent or earplugs for a work location that is too loud, for example—or by switching to a new work environment entirely.

Where to Find the Time

Working efficiently involves more than just organizing work materials; it is about organizing your time as well. There are a few tricks to using your time most effectively and other ways of literally “finding” time that might otherwise be wasted throughout the day.

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Scheduling Your Studies

Take some time to map out your typical daily schedule. Be realistic about the time that you usually spend working, with friends or family, sleeping, or taking care of household chores. Consider which of these time spans can be adjusted to accommodate

schoolwork. You may need to speak with others in your life, such as your employer, spouse, or even your children, to ask them for support as you schedule your studies. Try to identify a number of potential blocks of time long enough to enable you to immerse yourself into your schoolwork.

While it is easy to assume that you can simply stay up later or wake up earlier to complete your assignments, consider the impact of getting less sleep. Everyone has very real biological limitations to what they can do. If you find yourself losing so much sleep that you have difficulty thinking clearly, take some time to reexamine your schedule to identify other components that might be eliminated or rendered less time-consuming. If you find that you work best early in the morning or late at night while others sleep, then take advantage of your natural schedule but commit to taking a nap sometime during the day. It is common for people to think that they “don't have time for naps,” but any work that is done while tired is bound to take longer than work completed while fully alert. Naps can actually result in individuals having more time in the day since each task will take less time to complete.

While it is important to dedicate solid blocks of time to studying and completing assignments throughout the week, there are also periods of “lost time” that you may find throughout the day that can be exploited.

The waiting game. You call your insurance company, telephone service provider, or technical support for assistance, and then you wait. And wait. And wait. Your frustration grows as you watch the minutes pass on the clock, and your mind flashes with all of the other things that you could be doing with that time. Or perhaps you go to a doctor's appointment, and you find that things are running behind. And so you wait. You put laundry into the washing machine, and you wait for it to be done. You place dinner in the oven, and you wait.

In these situations, there are indeed better things that you could be doing! These are great opportunities to sneak in some reading or research for class. When you go to the doctor's office, pack some books or articles that need to be read. If you are about to make a phone call that may likely result in the “waiting game,” grab some reading for school first, or, if all of your work is online, make the phone call near your computer so that you can make some discussion board postings. [p. 40 ↓] If your

phone has the capability, place it on “speaker” so that you can listen for when your call is taken without having to actually hold the phone. If you are going to the laundromat or plan to spend some time in the kitchen, take your textbook or laptop with you. It isn't recommended that you get into any big projects when playing the “waiting game” since your concentration is likely to be interrupted, but if you can make a few discussion board postings or do a few pages of reading, it is that much less that you will need to do later.

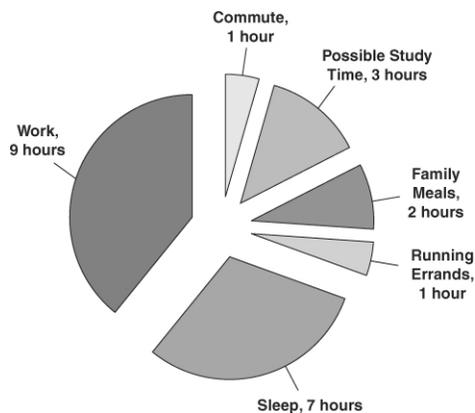
The work break. If you work more than a few hours a day at a job, you likely receive periodic breaks. If you use this time wisely, you will have less to complete once you get home at the end of the day. Pack a book or some articles that you need to read, just as you might for the doctor's waiting room. If you have a job that entails a lot of down-time and your boss is agreeable, you can also use this time to get some schoolwork done. Just be sure to not jeopardize your job by trying to multitask, as the strain of getting into trouble at work, or worse yet losing your job, is likely to render it even more difficult to focus on your schooling.

Mass transit. If you drive a long distance to and from work, you may be losing many hours each day in productivity. Driving has multiple effects on your day—not only do you lose the time that you actually spend driving, but you are likely to be more tired once you get home as well, rendering it difficult to focus on your studies. Explore the possibility of using mass transit or getting into a ride share program. With mass transit, you can read or rest during your commute, draft written assignments by hand and then type them later, or, if you have a laptop, get some writing done in transit. If your budget supports having a mobile broadband connection, you can actually access your online classroom during your commute.

If you carpool, be realistic about the types of work that you could do while riding in a car with others. It may be difficult to concentrate, or there may be a social expectation that you will engage in conversation during the ride. Still, consider other ways that a ride share could support your schooling. For example, you may be less tired at the end of the day if you are not driving, facilitating your productivity once you are at home. You might also consider setting aside the money that you save on gas for technology upgrades that will support your schooling, such as a new laptop.

Parenting time. Online students who have children at home may find it particularly difficult to make school a priority. Children may not understand the nature or importance of college study, and may be demanding of attention above and beyond their physical needs, making it difficult to focus. It may be necessary to sometimes call on the [p. 41 ↓] support of friends or loved ones to assist with child care as you work on major assignments. There are other ways of balancing schoolwork with parenting, though. Instead of reading a standard bedtime story, some students have read assigned textbook readings to their infants in a soothing voice; this allows students to complete his or her readings while also providing the young child the benefit of time with his or her parent. For some children, parents may be successful in hosting “reading time” in which the parent works while the child reads his or her own books, or, for older children, having “family study time,” where the parent works on assignments as the child completes homework. Providing some reward for everyone completing their work, such as watching a favorite movie or having ice cream, can provide incentive for the family to stay focused during that time.

Figure 3.2 Daily Allocation of Time



The Importance of Balance

Working to integrate college into an already-busy schedule can be a challenge. Online coursework may be particularly difficult, as students may not have realized how much

time would be required. If your [p. 42 ↓] schedule is starting to feel out of control, look more carefully at how you are spending your time to assess whether there is a way to lessen other time commitments. Cook larger batches of food and freeze the leftovers for dinner on another day; combine shopping trips into a single weekly outing; if you work an hourly wage job and can afford to do so, consider asking for a reduction in hours.

As you look for ways to allocate sufficient time to your schooling, don't forget the importance of maintaining balance in your day. While it is easy to get into a trap where you feel that you “don't have time” to go for a walk, indulge in a movie, or go out with friends, failure to take time to relax can actually slow down your work pace, which can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Use short breaks as an incentive to complete your work, and take a nap if you realize that you are having difficulty focusing. It may seem counter-intuitive, but taking breaks and getting enough sleep will actually help you find more time in your day by allowing you to work more efficiently.

Learning Tip: Make sure that you get enough sleep, as it will ultimately support your productivity.

Conclusion

You should now have a better idea of where you might study and how you might balance your schoolwork with other responsibilities. By staying organized and using the tricks provided to “find” time in your day, you can maximize your efficiency when studying and completing assignments. Fully exploit the flexibility of online coursework by reflecting critically on where and when you work the most efficiently and then developing habits that make the most of those spaces and times.

Reflection Questions

- What characteristics do you look for in a good work environment? Taking these factors into consideration, identify at least three places where you might conduct your schoolwork.

- Do you think that you could use your time more efficiently, and if so, how? Do you think that you dedicate enough time to your studies?
- What challenges do you anticipate in maintaining balance while you pursue your degree, and how can you address them?

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Chapter Checklist

- **# Gather the items that you need to support your studies and place them in a central location (“home base”).**
- **# Identify viable work areas using the four-step process in this chapter.**
- **# If you expect to work away from home on a regular basis, put together an “on-the-road study pack” and compose a checklist of the included items.**
- **# Identify how you might make more efficient use of your time throughout your day in a manner that supports your studies.**
- **# Establish a weekly schedule that includes dedicated time for studying, resting, and enjoying time with friends or loved ones.**

Related Resources

Home Office Design	http://www.hgtv.com/designers-portfolio/home-offices/index.html
Study Tips	http://www.academictips.org
Study Tips	http://www.helium.com/knowledge/185414-10-study-tips-for-college-students
Time Management	http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/time-management/WL00048

Time Management	http://www.collegeboard.com/student/plan/college-success/118.html
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Notes

1. See page 7 of Davies, R. S. (2003). Learner intent and online courses. *The Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 2(1), 1–10.

2. Aragon, S. R., Johnson, S. D., & Shaik, N. (2002). The influence of learning style preferences on student success in online versus face-to-face environments. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 16(4), 227–244.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781452226491.n3>