Examining your motives ahead of time for wanting to take an online class/program.

Acknowledging the many myths circulating about online education. Know the difference between the myths and the facts.

Recognizing that being an online student is not easier than being a student in a traditional classroom. It is just different.

Understanding that time commitment, open-mindedness, autonomy, and self-motivation are expected of a successful online student.

Understanding expectations for time on task: For every hour in class, students should spend 3 hours studying or reading outside of class. You will need to factor in the necessary time for your learning.

Making sure you have the necessary technical equipment and skills before you start your online class.

Understanding that most endeavors are generally not smooth at the beginning. Give this one a little extra time, effort, and positive energy, and you can be a successful online student.

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**Online education is where it is at. As an online student, I have control of when I learn, how I learn, and what extra I learn. I gain only as much as I put in; this is what distinguishes the online learning environment. Online education is moving toward a user driven, just-in-time model, and as an adult learner this is exactly what I want from my education.**

— Dan Record, instructional designer and online PhD student
Taking on the new identity of “student” for the duration of your class or program is undeniably a huge undertaking. Committing to completing a degree takes deep dedication and desire. You will have to become accustomed to a brand-new mindset. The decision to become an online student should tie heavily into your own goals and dreams because everything you are about to embark on comes down to you.

Because online education is still fairly new, many misconceptions are still connected to it. The number-one fact to remember as an online student is that this mode of education is not easier than being a student in a traditional classroom. It is just different.

- You have a lot more flexibility regarding time spent in and around class, but
- Online learning still takes as much if not more time compared with a traditional classroom experience.

### Online Learning: Hybrid or All Online

You may choose to attend one or more online courses or you may select a program that is offered entirely online. Maybe you never planned to be an online learner, but during your available time frame a required course is only offered online, making you an online learner by default. Whatever the situation, you will find that online courses are both similar to and different from classes in the on-ground classroom. These similarities and differences may not be what you expect, so remember to keep an open mind!

In general, university courses are categorized by modality in four ways:

1. **On-ground, or traditional courses.** These are the courses that many of us grew up with. We go to a designated classroom at a particular time, and a teacher guides us through the course material. Homework is assigned for the times between classes, and it is generally due from one class meeting period to the next. Some assignments, and most tests, take place during designated class time.

2. **Online courses.** These are courses in which the entire class is staged online. For the most part, students and instructors never meet each other face to face.

3. **Blended, or hybrid courses.** These courses are sometimes difficult to distinguish. A blended course has some online components and some on-ground components. How this occurs, though, can vary greatly:
   a. One hybrid course may have students attend a local classroom once a week but offer all other instruction online.
   b. Another may meet only for the first week and the last week of class in a classroom, and the interim of the course occurs online.

   As long as the course combines online learning and traditional classroom time in some way, it is considered blended.

4. **Web enhanced courses.** Web enhanced is a newer term in online learning. For example, for a web-enhanced course, you retrieve your materials online. You do
not actually attend class online, but your book, grade postings, and other course materials may be available online. Most schools have some type of web enhancement already, but surprisingly, many do not. Sometimes, schools begin with a web-enhanced approach before they launch a full online program.

None of the course modalities outlined is better than the others in terms of quality. For any course, many factors make the difference in whether it is “good,” including the quality of the instruction, the teacher, and the organization of the class. You will have to decide what makes a class “better” for you based on your own goals and priorities. Which of the modalities of learning outlined sounds like it might work best for you?

**What Is Expected of a Student?**

To begin with, you must truly understand what you can expect to encounter in this new role as an online learner. You have the power to create your own success. Here are some of the issues that are important for an online learner to understand.

**The Importance of Time Commitment**

1. *You are your own self-regulator in an online environment and to succeed you must plan and manage your time correctly.*
2. Although there most likely will be a designated *day*, online courses often do not have a designated class time. So you will need to determine how much time your class responsibilities will take and establish your own schedule for how to integrate coursework into your life.
3. Attending school online will take *the same if not more time* than a traditional class; what’s different is how you allot the time and when you expend the time.

**The Importance of Open-Mindedness**

Online is both similar to and different from a traditional classroom. Manage your expectations!

1. Have an open mind when you start online courses, and be willing to explore and become familiar with the medium.
2. Discover what the differences are, and learn how to take advantage of them instead of letting them intimidate you.
3. Remember, only an open mind can be educated.

**The Importance of Autonomy and Self-Motivation**

1. In an online environment, there is no need to make yourself presentable, drive to campus, locate parking, and find the classroom. But although you may be able to participate in class while in your pajamas, you will still have to engage fully in the online environment.
2. You will have to make time for class and homework, be responsive to your instructor and fellow students, and you will have to do a lot of reading and writing.

Everyone takes a different amount of time to acclimate to the online environment. It may be confusing and overwhelming at the start, but you may be surprised at how quickly you become comfortable. Give yourself a chance to adjust and get up to speed.

### Myths and Facts About Learning Online

If you are new to online learning, you may have some misconceptions or you may not be aware of some facts regarding this medium. Take a look at the following table that lists myths and facts, and see how your own knowledge and experience with online measures up.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MYTH</th>
<th>FACT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online courses are less rigorous than on-ground courses.</td>
<td>Not necessarily. Online learning varies by course just like the traditional classroom, but, overall, you will probably be expected to do more writing, and you will need to participate more actively than you might have in a traditional classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructors in an online environment are more aloof.</td>
<td>It depends on the instructor, but, in many cases, online instructors are extremely responsive to student contact, and you may find it even easier to initiate contact in the online environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online courses cost more than on-ground courses.</td>
<td>Tuition can be considerably higher, but you should also factor in such expenses as gas, parking, and child care that online students do not have to pay for.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is harder to interact and make friends with your classmates online.</td>
<td>Not necessarily. Although an online classroom is different from a traditional classroom, you may have just as much opportunity for interaction. Once you become accustomed to interacting mainly through writing, you will find plenty of opportunities to seek out others and bond with your classmates. Online courses often have a chat room or lounge area in the course where students are encouraged to go and virtually “hang out” and interact with each other. Our experience has been that students are more communicative and self-revealing in an online environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online classes fit easily into a busy schedule.</td>
<td>Perhaps. Online courses are more flexible, but just because you do not have to go to the classroom at a certain time doesn’t mean you do not need to dedicate time to your class work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Homework in the online environment is not the same. | Not necessarily. Actually, most of the assignments you will find online are similar, if not the same, as in a traditional classroom and consist of papers, exams, presentations, and so on.

Online education is lower quality. | Not so. The same accrediting bodies that work with traditional schools approve online education. Online courses frequently use the same instructors and curriculum as their traditional counterparts. The bottom line is that, just as with the traditional classroom, the online classroom is what you make of it.

Online instructors are always online and available. | Not so. Some online instructors have established office hours when they are available. At other institutions, there might be a 24- or 48-hour guaranteed response time. The policy varies with the instructor and the institution. It is your responsibility to find out what the policy is.

It is impossible to work in virtual teams. | Not so. Virtual teams are the reality, not only in many classroom situations but also in the workplace. A good team is a good team whether it is virtual or face to face.

There are no support systems for online learners. | Not necessarily. Online schools vary, but often they have virtual incarnations of the same resources that traditional schools have, such as labs, tutors, and libraries.

Online classrooms provide a level of interaction and give-and-take that is not always possible in a traditional classroom. Both the breadth and the depth of student engagement can be increased.

In terms of breadth, it is common for all students in the class to see each other’s assignments. That can be a little hard to accept at first and you may feel intimidated, but keep in mind, the other students feel the same way!

In terms of depth, there is greater time and opportunity to review the work of others, as well as your own thoughts. You will have time to really review one another’s messages and assignments because these will be posted and remain in the newsgroups for the duration of the class. This differs from the need to respond immediately that is typical of face-to-face classroom discussions. Assuming it is not a scheduled discussion, an online student who needs time to process information can read the material, go for a walk while formulating a response, and then return and respond.

**Are You Ready to Be an Online Student?**

Readiness means many things. We discuss these issues in more depth later in the book, but for now, consider the following.
Becoming an Online Learner

**Time Available**

You recognize you will need to schedule time for your online course. Keep in mind that for traditional students, the expectation is that for every hour in class, they will spend 3 hours studying or reading outside of class. The same formula is generally applied for online courses. A student taking a 3-credit class for 16 weeks spends about 9 hours a week out of class on assignments. It is quite possible an online student will have a compressed class that may last only for 5 to 8 weeks, so factor in the necessary time for your learning.

**Technical Equipment**

Do you have access to a computer? Do you have an Internet connection? Have you satisfied the requirements of your institution regarding platform and speed of connection?

The school generally does not care what kind of computer you use. But they do have specifications for the platform you use (e.g., Windows, Mac).

1. At the very least you will need to have a word-processing application, an Internet browser, and a slide presentation application.
2. Your Internet connection speed will also need to be at a certain level. And you will want to make sure you have, or can download, certain relevant plug-ins and support programs such as Java or Adobe Acrobat.

**Technical Skills**

You will need to rely on your technical skills as much as your study skills in the online environment. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Do you know how to type?
2. Do you know how to format a document?
3. Do you know how to send an e-mail with an attachment?
4. Are you a competent reader?

You will find numerous resources to help you attain these skills: friends and neighbors, online tutorials, outside training courses, and maybe even training labs offered by your institution.

**Your Motives**

Consider why you have chosen to further your education. Ask yourself these questions:

- How serious are you?
- Why are you doing this? You might be doing it to obtain a promotion at work or to expand your career opportunities or just because you love to learn. Take time to understand fully the reason you are doing it. Own it.
What goal will this degree help you achieve? Or is it the goal in itself? Only you can truly answer this question. Are you doing it for your own reasons or to please others?

Do you really have the time for it?
Do you really want to dedicate the time that will be necessary?
Are you looking forward to what you will learn about?

Really take the time to explore your own thoughts and feelings about the details of this degree and decide whether the timing and the focus are right for you. Knowing the answer to why you are motivated can help you stay motivated.

Use Some Tools

In addition to your self-analysis, tools are available that can assist you in measuring your readiness to be an online learner. The Readiness for Education at a Distance Indicator (READI) is one we recommend.

READI is an online assessment that helps you evaluate your strengths and weaknesses for online learning. It measures many of the items you have read about in this book so far. READI will help you understand your readiness for online learning in the following areas:

1. **Individual attributes.** How motivated you are. Whether or not you a procrastinator. Are you willing to ask for help when you need it?
2. **Learning styles.** How do you learn best? Some students learn best alone, and others learn best surrounded by people. Some people learn best by reading, others by looking at pictures.
3. **Technical competency.** How well can you use your computer and the Internet?
4. **On-screen reading speed and comprehension.** How fast do you read from your computer screen, and how much of it do you remember?
5. **Typing speed and accuracy.** How quickly and accurately do you type?

READI is a relatively simple way to explore how comfortable you will be with online education. There are no right and wrong answers. After you complete READI you will receive a score report that will help you understand what you can do to become a successful online learner. In addition to your score report, your school may also provide some additional resources to help you succeed.

In some cases, your instructor may have decided to include the READI assessment as part of the course you are enrolled in right now. If your book did not come packaged with this assessment but you are interested in using this tool, you may explore READI further and/or make inquiries by visiting http://www.readi.info.
Becoming an Online Learner

Adapt Your Attitude and Prepare for Success

We said this before: Do not begin this online learning endeavor expecting it to be easy, but don’t anticipate failure either. Cultivate your self-confidence and be willing to change the way you think about school and your own abilities.

Do not become distraught the minute something goes wrong. You will have assignments where you will not score as highly as you thought you would or wish you would. Everyone has those! Do not immediately think of this as failing, but try to look at it as an opportunity for improvement. Think positively: You will succeed.

The first time you do anything can be very challenging. Recall the first time you rode a bike or your first day on the job. Most things are generally not smooth at the beginning, but give it time, effort, and positive energy, and you can be a successful online student.

Here is an analogy: Look at your introduction to online learning as you would your first visit to a foreign country. You will need time to learn the language, the lay of the land, and how to interact with the local people, but, given sufficient time and effort, it will soon become second nature. Give yourself time to adapt to online learning.

Note: As we all know, the Internet is dynamic and ever evolving. If any of these websites are not available or you wish to seek out additional information, we encourage you to do your own online search. Consider the concepts covered in the chapter that are most important to you, and think of various terms that could be used to describe them. For this chapter, some potential keywords include:

- successful online learner
- preparing online student
- online readiness

When searching online, consider different ways to express ideas. Remember to use synonyms and related words. Try phrasing things in different ways. And always review more than the first few pages of the search results.

For more specific information on searching online, refer to Chapter 9.

Now is your chance to explore the topics of Chapter 1 further. For each of the chapters in this book, we have selected a few specific websites that can be helpful resources for you. Check out the sites listed here. Enjoy expanding your knowledge, and more power to you!

Preparing Yourself for Online Learning
http://www.studygs.net/online/index.htm

Is Distance Learning Right for You?
http://distancelearn.about.com/od/isitforyou/a/considering.htm

The 7 Mistakes That Distance Learners Make
http://distancelearn.about.com/od/distancelearning101/a/7mistakes.htm

For Online Students: Resources, Guides, Tips & Tutorials
http://www.ibritt.com/resources/stu_forstudents.htm