It’s really simple, the reason I went back to school. I wanted to change my life.

*Andy Sayles,*

*student*

**BECOMING A STUDENT**

You may want to make a career change, to learn skills that will help you gain a promotion at work, to enrich your leisure-time experiences, or to complete your education after an interruption. Whatever your goal in returning to school, that goal involves changing your perception of both yourself and the possibilities for your future. Through education, you hope to give a new direction to your life.

Adult learners return to school at different stages in their lives and careers. You may never have attended college, or you already may have experienced some form of higher education. You may decide to go to college after raising a family and working to finance your own children’s education. You may log on at midnight to send a completed assignment to your instructor in an online class. You may come to class after a full day’s work, after making dinner for your family, or before your night shift at the local hospital. You are mature, you are motivated, and you are busy.

There’s one other trait that you are likely to share with other adult learners: You are feeling nervous about the journey ahead. Do you have the ability to do college-level work? Can your experiences outside of school help you succeed in class? Will returning to school be worth the considerable time and expense that you will devote to the effort?

This book will help you to answer “yes” to each of these questions. As an adult learner, you have considerable strengths that traditional undergraduates may not have.
In this chapter, you will learn how to:
- assess your strengths
- begin to set long-term goals for yourself
- enlist cooperation and support from your friends and family
- build a good relationship with your instructors
- feel comfortable and productive in class
- see how this book will help you during your college career

LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD: APPLYING LIFE EXPERIENCES TO BEING A STUDENT

If you visualize the person you were at the age of 18, when many students begin their college careers, you’ll see a different person from the one you are today. At 18:

- Your decision to be in school may have been influenced by peer pressure or demands from your family.
- You may have had a support system—such as your parents, school guidance counselors, or other trusted adults—to offer guidance and advice if you had problems.
- Your social life may have competed heavily with your academic work.
- You probably had not yet taken on such adult responsibilities as raising a family, supporting yourself, or paying taxes.
- You had less experience with the demands of the workplace.
- You may not have had a clear career goal.

In contrast, as an adult, you yourself are making the decision to return to school and take on the tasks associated with learning. Most likely, you have had experience in the workplace and/or with raising a family; this experience has helped you to see the value of education in daily life. Your life experiences have given you considerable strengths. For example:

- ability to juggle many activities at once
- experience in meeting deadlines
- experience in working collaboratively
- experience in recognizing the complexities of problems

Take a moment to think about how your life experiences can help you in your new role as a student.
**Juggling Responsibilities**

Barbara is a young mother with two children under four years of age. Barbara completed only one year of college before she married, and years later, she has a goal for herself: When her youngest child enters first grade, Barbara wants to return to the workplace to supplement her family’s income. But with one year of college, she feels that she will be at a disadvantage, competing against younger workers with college degrees. Therefore, she wants to earn an undergraduate degree. Although she has tentative plans of majoring in business administration, she is open to thinking about other possibilities. Her goal is simply to complete her undergraduate education.

For the past six years, Barbara has been working at home as a wife and mother, as well as participating in the cooperative nursery school that her older child attends. Juggling activities has been a necessary part of her life. From simple family-related deadlines, such as planning an anniversary dinner for her parents, to purchasing supplies for the nursery school, Barbara learned how to:

- break down big tasks into small, manageable tasks
- use lists, calendars, and planning books to set priorities
- be flexible when unavoidable problems (her son’s ear infection or bad driving conditions) interfere with her plans
- take time for rest and relaxation so that she can approach tasks with a fresh mind and spirit

**Evaluating Information**

Rafael, who has just begun an online adult education program, is the oldest child in his family; his three younger siblings—a sister and two brothers—look to him for guidance in making family decisions. Recently, Rafael and his siblings had to make a difficult decision: whether or not to place their ailing mother in a nursing home.

Because the decision was so emotional for all of the family, Rafael took it upon himself to present information as objectively as possible. He met with his
mother’s doctor; visited local nursing homes and talked with staff members and some patients; talked with a social worker about possible alternatives, such as a visiting nurse or home health care worker; and talked with a co-worker who had placed her father in a nursing home.

When the family gathered to talk about the decision, Rafael summarized what he had found out. Although the social worker presented a positive picture of home health care, his mother’s doctor suggested that Rafael’s mother was failing physically and would possibly need emergency care at times. Because the nursing home had its own medical facilities, she would be served better there. The doctor’s opinion, then, carried more weight than the social worker’s because he could predict his patient’s future needs.

The staff at the nursing home wanted to sell the facility’s services, so the information provided at the home did not weigh as heavily as testimony from the patients, who generally were happy with their care. In addition, Rafael’s co-worker had had a positive experience after she placed her father in the same home. Weighing information allowed the family to come to an informed decision. From the process, Rafael learned how to:

■ gather appropriate information from experts
■ evaluate the information in light of the experts’ special interests
■ evaluate the information in light of his family’s own needs

Working with Others

Ken works a four-to-midnight shift at his factory job as well as attending classes in an adult education program, so he is rarely home to see his children at dinner or in the evenings. When his wife told him that one of his sons—who just turned 13—seemed to be part of a street gang, he first became angry; then he decided to do something about it. If his son were able to participate in supervised after-school activities, Ken believed that he would not be as likely to get into trouble. His community, however, had no after-school programs.

For a month, Ken spent his days off looking for support for his idea. He spoke with the principal of the local middle school, where his son was in eighth grade, and he spoke with several local ministers. All offered to provide space if Ken could provide the personnel and find funding. Who would supervise the teenagers? Who would pay for supplies and salaries?

Concerned with his son’s welfare, Ken developed a flyer describing the problem. The principal offered to distribute the flyer at the school and to call a meeting in the school’s cafeteria. Although only a dozen parents showed up for the meeting, four of the parents were willing to work with Ken on the project.
Because Ken was accustomed to working independently on the job, committee work proved a challenge in itself. At first, Ken was afraid that the project would fail just because the committee could not agree on its goals. Then he decided to use the “factory method” of solving the problem by giving each committee member a specific task: to find an appropriate space, to plan a reasonable budget, to investigate sources of funding, and to make a publicity plan for the program.

As the members worked on their tasks, they began to respect one another’s efforts and opinions. When the most convenient space turned out to be the school’s gymnasium, they agreed that a sports program would be a reasonable beginning for the after-school project. Once they made that initial decision, they managed to work together and started the program within six months. Ken’s son was among the first participants.

From his experience in solving a community problem, Ken learned how to:

- articulate a problem to others
- enlist support
- listen and allow others to be heard
- generate support and respect within a group

**Researching a Problem**

Tony is returning to school with no college experience. After high school, he took a full-time job as assistant to the buyer of a local discount department store and, in five years, moved up to a more responsible position. But Tony wants the opportunity to move even further in business and marketing. He realizes that he needs an undergraduate degree to help him attain his career goals.

Tony’s responses to the questions on page 3 focused on his purchase of his first car. Like many 18-year-olds, Tony was obsessed for months with the decision. He spoke to friends, visited used car lots, read magazines that tested and ranked cars, and even spent hours in the library reading some reference books that ranked used cars. By the end of those months, he knew the book value of every car in his price range; he could lecture on the relative merits of various cars. He finally felt that he had enough information to make a decision. When he purchased an eight-year-old Ford Taurus, he knew he had made the right decision.

From this project, Tony learned how to:

- find answers to specific questions from a number of different sources
- select the information that proved most helpful in the decision-making process
The situations that Barbara, Rafael, Ken, and Tony experienced have direct bearing on their work as students. As a student, you will need to:

- juggle class assignments, family life, and your job in order to meet deadlines
- evaluate and weigh information that comes from a variety of sources
- work collaboratively with others in finding information and solving problems
- do research and reading as you fulfill your course assignments

HOW BEING A STUDENT AFFECTS YOUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

Many adult students wonder how their becoming a college student will affect the relationships they have with others, particularly friends, family, and instructors. In the sections that follow, people who have been through the process themselves and who are eager to share their experiences with you discuss this important concern.

Friends and Family Members

Susan Bell discovered that some people she knew did not understand her motivation to return to school, and they made her question her commitment to take a new direction in her life. That questioning, however, only made her more certain that she was making the right decision. “Friends, family, and total strangers may make you uncomfortable about becoming a student,” she comments; “they are used to you in a different role. Don’t let the guilt trips knock you off course. Some people may be threatened, some envious, some just plain uncomprehending. It is up to you to believe in yourself and what you are trying to accomplish.”

There are times when believing in yourself and your goals will not be easy. “As with any life change,” Hollis Colby adds, “becoming an adult student requires personal sacrifices because it requires a commitment. In turn, you must become more protective of your time, and this, of course, can pose problems at home. First, you must accept your decision to return to school and make it a part of your life. Second, this helps others to accept the fact that there will be certain times when you need to do things that do not involve them, like study, for example. It is not always easy to make time decisions, but it gets easier as you go. And others tend to become more understanding and sometimes interested, too.” You can generate that sense of understanding by sharing your experiences with friends and family.

Another adult student, Robert Vilardi, suggests that you set aside time for classes and studying, just as you set aside time to go to work or to do household chores. Make it a necessity, he advises, and others will begin to see it as an
important part of your life. “Find a physically separate space and set a definite
time for studying,” Robert says. “Treat it like a business activity. When you
return to your family and work from studying, you’ll know that ‘school’ is taken
care of, and you’ll feel more relaxed.”

Instructors

Instructors find that teaching adults is a refreshing change from teaching tradi-
tional undergraduates. As stated earlier: Adults have made the decision to come
back to school; they are in class because they want to be there; they are highly
motivated; their perspective has been enriched by their life experiences. These
important qualities make teaching adults rewarding and revitalizing for instructors.

CLASSROOM PROTOCOL

As soon as you enter a classroom, you’ll see that there is no prescribed uniform,
no dress code, and no assumptions about what students wear. Some adult stu-
dents will be dressed in jeans and a T-shirt; others may be wearing the suits and
ties or the silk blouses and scarves they have worn all day at work. Even though
you might come to class dressed casually, neatness, cleanliness, and appropri-
ateness are important.

Even if there are no prescriptions about dress, however, there are shared
assumptions about classroom manners. A classroom, after all, is a small com-
munity. Although the instructor is the leader in that community, each student is
responsible for helping to make the class-
room atmosphere conducive to learning.

Diversity

Academic communities value diversity
among students and faculty. Diversity
includes race, ethnicity, socioeconomic
class, sexual orientation, religion, age, polit-
cal beliefs, cultural experiences, work
experiences, travel experiences, and values.
The academic setting encourages respectful
sharing of opinions and openness to other
people’s views. Many people hold stereo-
types of others, but the academic commu-
nity encourages its participants to examine
and question those views.

Dos and Don’ts in a Diverse
Community

1. Do listen respectfully and allow others
to express their views.
2. Don’t ask one individual to represent
the views of an entire group to which he
or she may belong.
3. Do encourage others to participate in
discussions.
4. Don’t ask anyone to share personal
information that he or she may not be
ready to share.
5. Do ask questions respectfully.
**Key Words in Academia**

Throughout your academic career, you’ll hear the words *argument* and *critical thinking* in many of your classes. In college, these words have a special meaning, different from their ordinary usage. Neither term has a negative connotation, and neither implies hostility or attack.

*Argument* refers to an assertion that results from analysis or research. If you argue a point, you make that point and defend it with evidence. If you present an argument in a history class, for example, you might be writing an essay about the causes of the Civil War, based on your readings and research. You will support your ideas with evidence from your sources. Another student may present a different argument, based on other evidence.

*Critical thinking* means analysis, not negative criticism. When you think critically, you ask questions, puzzle out problems logically, and bring your powers of reason to an issue. College gives you mental tools to hone your ability to think critically and analytically, rather than emotionally or impressionistically. When a professor asks you to write a critical paper on some question, he or she is asking for analysis and not a negative opinion.

**PRESENTING YOUR WORK**

**Written Work**

In most courses, written work should be presented in typed (or word-processed) form, double-spaced with one-inch margins, in 12-point (or equivalent) typeface. Papers should be fastened with a staple or a paper clip. Most instructors prefer that pages be numbered. All work should be identified with your name, class, and date. Some students, with access to countless font types and color printers, may be tempted to present work that is graphically inventive and colorful. Such presentations, however, usually are not appropriate at the college level. These are some general guidelines; you’ll want to check the course syllabus for each instructor’s requirements for presenting your work.

**Oral Presentations**

In many courses, you may present your work orally; sometimes you will hand in a written version of the oral presentation, as well. Rehearsing your presentation in front of a friend or family member may help you avoid “stage fright” in front of the class. Your teacher usually will provide some guidelines for the presentation, such as length and availability of visual services (video player, computer).
guidelines for Oral Presentations

- **Stay within the time limit.** Generally, speakers allow two minutes to deliver each printed page of text. If you are not reading a prepared text, time your presentation by rehearsing it—even if you are the only listener.

- **Use a conversational tone.** Speak audibly, emphasize words that are important, and vary your pace, just as you would in conversation. Glance around the room from time to time so that all of your listeners feel included.

- **Practice.** You’ll engage your audience more successfully if you make eye contact with them. Rehearsing will help you to feel comfortable with your presentation.

- **Outline.** Speaking from an outline or bullet points will help you to look at your audience rather than printed pages. You might project your outline or bullet points on a screen or chart so that your audience can see the shape of your presentation.

- **Be concrete.** Concrete information engages listeners better than abstractions. Examples and anecdotes usually are more interesting than statistics.

- **Define terms.** Think about what your listeners already know about your topic and what they might not know. Avoid using acronyms (WHO for World Health Organization, for example) unless you first tell the audience what the letters stand for.

- **Use visual aids.** Such materials include handouts, charts, slides, video recordings, and presentation software (such as PowerPoint).

- **Elicit questions.** Invite listeners to ask questions, and leave your audience with questions that your work has generated for you. By encouraging discussion, you actively involve your listeners.

**Collaborative Projects**

In some courses, students work on projects collaboratively. Collaboration means that each member in a group takes responsibility for part of the project. Collaboration depends on cooperation and dependability among all group members. Sometimes, each member will receive a separate grade based on his or her written work as part of the project; in some classes, the group as a whole receives a grade. Your teacher will explain how collaborative projects are graded in the class.
GUIDELINES FOR COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

- **Know the assignment.** Make sure all the members of the group understand the assignment in the same way. If there are questions, check with your teacher.

- **Make a schedule.** Group members will have many obligations—other classes, work, family, or even a social life. Agree on a schedule that will work for everyone and lead to successful completion of the project. Keep a progress report or checklist to monitor accomplishments.

- **Share the workload.** Successful collaboration means that everyone contributes equally. If a member of your group cannot contribute, he or she should consult with the teacher for possible reassignment.

- **Check in regularly.** Meeting in person or by e-mail will help the group share accomplishments as well as problems.

- **“Play well” with others.** Even if one member is clearly more organized or prepared than the others, encourage all members to feel appreciated. Don’t allow one group member to dominate discussions or decisions.

LEARNING ONLINE

Besides enrolling in courses on college campuses, many adult learners take online classes where they never actually see or meet their instructor or classmates. Some online classes take place in a virtual classroom, where all students log on at the same time, listen and respond to one another and their instructor, and work on assignments independently. This kind of instruction is called *synchronous communication.* Other online classes are self-paced, where students log on at any time and communicate to class discussions by posting comments on the course site. This kind of instruction is called *asynchronous communication.* Most courses incorporate ways for students to share ideas, such as chat rooms, bulletin boards, or e-mail connections.

Becoming a student in an online course draws on many of the same skills and strengths as being a student in a physical classroom. In addition, however, here are some tips for success in the online environment.

**TIPS FOR ONLINE LEARNERS**

1. **Do participate.** Just as in a classroom, you have a chance to make your ideas known in a virtual classroom or through bulletin boards, chat rooms, or e-mail. All instructors want their students to participate by sharing ideas with them and with the rest of the class. You will get more out of the experience if you are a lively respondent.
Classroom Dos and Don’ts

- **Do participate.** When your instructor asks a question, she hopes that students will respond. All instructors want to create lively class discussions, and they welcome your contributions. Some students, especially at the beginning of their college career, hesitate to speak in class. But when you share your perspectives and ideas with others, you help to create a rich learning environment. When you do participate, remember that you are communicating with the whole class, not only with the instructor; the students in the back of the room want to hear your comments, too.

- **Don’t monopolize class discussions.** Sometimes, in their enthusiasm for the course, a few students will try to answer every question the instructor asks, comment on everything any other student says, and interject questions or remarks throughout every class. Although instructors appreciate eager and engaged students, they want all of the class members, even those who may be shy and may lack confidence, to feel comfortable about speaking out in class. You can help the instructor by monitoring your own contributions.

- **Do come to class prepared.** Lectures and discussions build on what you have read and written outside of class. You will be a more valuable contributor, and you will learn more, if you do your homework.

- **Don’t use class time to discuss personal concerns.** If you need an extension to complete a paper, for example, or if you want to inform your instructor that you will be missing a class, talk to the instructor privately before or after class. On the other hand, if you have a question related to the course material, the syllabus, or the course requirements—if you need a term defined or a concept clarified, for example—**do** ask. It is likely that if you do not understand something, others do not also.

- **Don’t be distracting.** In the workplace, you know that staff meetings can be disrupted by a co-worker who spills coffee, whispers to a neighbor, or taps a pencil incessantly while others are trying to talk. A classroom is no different. Don’t fidget, eat, rustle papers, whisper, pass notes, or otherwise distract your instructor and classmates. Turn off your watch alarm and cell phone, and make sure that your beeper or pager does not go off during class.

- **Do arrive on time.** You’ll disrupt the class if you consistently come late. If you have a problem arriving on time, discuss it with your instructor. If coming late is unavoidable, remove your coat and take out your notebook and pen before you enter the classroom, take the first available seat, and make sure you catch up with any announcements that were made before you arrived. If you need to leave early, tell the instructor before class begins, take a seat as near to the door as possible, and put on your coat after you leave the room.
2. *Don’t dominate online discussions.* Sitting alone in front of a computer invites some students to digress or pontificate. Remember, your instructor, along with everyone else, is reading your message. Keep it relevant.

3. *Do write in a serious and respectful tone.* Messages to your professor and classmates are different from casual e-mails or text messages. Write in full sentences, avoid slang and colloquial terms, and be aware that your audience consists of a diverse community of learners.

4. *Do be prepared.* Unless you are attending a virtual class, you will need to exert self-discipline to complete assignments and keep up with class discussions. Before contributing to those discussions, make sure you have done the class work.

5. *Do set a realistic pace for a self-paced course—and then keep up with your planned schedule.* Make appointments with yourself to log on at specific times and do your homework regularly.

**GETTING YOUR WORK DONE**

Whether you work in an office or at home, you’ve evolved some strategies for getting your work done successfully. Those strategies can be applied to class work, as well.

**Set priorities.** You’ve learned how to organize your tasks according to deadlines, ease of completion, and importance. You’ve learned that if you have a large task to complete, it can be broken down into smaller components. The course syllabus will give you deadlines for work throughout the semester. Keeping a separate calendar for school can help you to break down your work responsibilities into manageable projects. Chapter 4, “Strategies for Managing Time and Stress,” discusses setting priorities in more detail.

**Organize.** You probably have a filing system, a weekly planner, and a daily routine at work. You need a similar system for school. At work, your first task of the day may be to check e-mail and voice mail; at school, your first task may be to check your assignment book and syllabus. Establishing a study routine is as important as establishing a work routine.

**Know your responsibilities.** Your job description delineates your work responsibilities, and your syllabus tells you your course-related responsibilities. In a sense, the syllabus is like a contract between you and the instructor; it tells you what you need to do to complete the course successfully.

**Make informed decisions.** At work or at home, you know that the decision-making process involves gathering information and listening to others. Often, you need to seek that information and ask for help. Asking for information and help is not
1. Write a letter to a friend or family member explaining why you want to return to school. As you read the letter, note which reasons seem stronger than others. Why are these stronger?
2. What reactions can you anticipate from the recipient of the letter?
3. How might you meet any objections that the recipient voices?

a sign of weakness, but rather it is evidence of your maturity as a student. Don’t hesitate to use the many support services offered through your school. Chapter 3, “Identifying College Resources,” discusses support services in more detail.

Identify helpful colleagues. Forming study groups, finding a peer reader for a paper, or just meeting a classmate for coffee to discuss the ideas of the course is a stimulating experience for most students. Some instructors distribute class lists with telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for all students enrolled. In other classes, you may have a chance to work collaboratively with your classmates on some projects. Even if these options are not built into your course, you’ll be rewarded by taking the time to establish connections with your classmates.

SETTING GOALS

As discussed earlier in this chapter, adults have many reasons to return to school. Among those reasons:

- to complete an interrupted degree
- to begin a new degree program
- to prepare for a career change
- to learn new skills for career advancement
- for personal enrichment
- for intellectual challenge
- for a sense of community

Just as students differ in their goals, they differ in the time it will take to achieve their goals. Some students can attend school full-time; others can take no more than one course each semester. While some students may complete an undergraduate degree program in a few years, others envision themselves as students for a decade or more. Having a clear sense of your own goals is the first step toward realizing them.
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

