

20 Essential Tips for e-Learners

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Summary

Over the past decade, there has been growing utilization of online technologies, especially the World Wide Web, to both supplement and replace many training activities traditionally provided in the classroom. While offering financial savings to many organizations, the rising use of technology for training has brought with it many new challenges for us as e-learners, since most of us are not prepared for the online training environment. Although many learning skills and study habits required for e-learning success are closely related to those for classroom success, online success in training often requires additional learning strategies that are not typically taught in high school and college.

From strategies for using instant messaging software for organizing team projects to tactics for efficiently taking notes within online course readings, the application of study skills and habits for success in online training is essential for our success in e-learning. In this article is a sample of learning strategies that we can use in order to be successful in our online training experiences.

Introduction

Whether we realize it or not, over the years, each of us has developed a set of learning skills and study habits we use to succeed in conventional classroom training—from raising our hands to let the instructor know that we have a question or comment to showing nonverbal signs of interest when other students are talking. Fortunately, many of these same skills can also be applied by analogous behaviors when training is moved to the online classroom. However, online learning also requires some new behaviors. This article will provide a review of both familiar and new behaviors as they apply to online chats, discussion boards, email, and reading.

Communicating clearly and using the technologies to your benefit will be keys to your success in this new learning environment.

Online Real-Time Chats

Synchronous or real-time chats provide one of the few online training experiences where you can receive immediate replies to your questions or comments, thus allowing for a conversation to develop quickly with your instructor or classmates. For that reason, you will want to use these opportunities in a manner that takes advantage of the unique benefits of this technology.

1. Prepare a list of questions that you would like to ask and receive answers to during the chat. Write the questions in a document that you can cut and paste from during the discussion. For long questions, this will save you the time of typing and editing the question before posting it to the chat. This technique will also help you avoid grammatical and spelling errors.
2. Visit the chat area at least one day before the real-time chat to make sure that you have access and adequate bandwidth for participating. If you do not have access, this will give you time to contact technical support. Also, many training websites will have multiple chat areas, so confirm that you are accessing the correct one.
3. Create a good studying environment for the chat. (For example, turn off the television, ask your family or co-workers not to interrupt you, turn off any instant messaging programs, and turn off your email.)
4. Review any rules, agenda, and/or etiquette guides provided by the instructor or host for the chat. If you are going to lead a real-time chat, then develop an agenda and set of rules for the chat. These should be shared with the other chat members prior to the chat session.
5. Each comment or question posted by other students in the discussion does not require your response. Respond only to those that address you specifically or those for which your response will make a value contribution to the discussion. This will also help keep the conversation focused on the topic.
6. Improve your comprehension by being an active participant in the discussions. Attempt to find the right balance by joining in conversations while avoiding dominance of conversations.

Online Discussion Boards

Asynchronous discussions (normally in online bulletin or discussion boards) offer the opportunity to carry on a conversation with your fellow learners and instructors at times convenient to you. Since each participant in the discussion can choose when to reply to the latest addition to the conversation, this asynchronous tool offers the user greater flexibility than synchronous chats do. The pace and length of the conversation can vary greatly. The additional time afforded ensures you the opportunity to clarify your comments or elaborate on questions and thus reduce the chances of miscommunicating.

7. Determine the instructor expectations for the conversation and your postings. Informal postings (like those that you would write to a friend) are common, but most often the clarity and precision of formal communications will be desired for online training. Identify any model postings that an instructor may have provided to illustrate the desired level and types of participation.
8. Schedule times each day (or week, depending on the length of the online training) during which you will participate in the online discussions. Include in this schedule how much time you will spend reading the postings of others as well as time for responding to postings with your comments or questions.
9. Most often, you will want to write one or two well-structured and thought-out paragraphs in a single posting to an online discussion board. Despite the fact that these paragraphs should have an introduction, supporting facts, and conclusion, as in any well-structured writing, online discussion postings are typically short. You should try to limit your postings to four to six sentences in each of one or two paragraphs.
10. Try not to read too much into statements made by others students or to take comments too personally. Miscommunications are common in online discussions because many of the typical nonverbal communication tools (such as eye contact, body gestures, and so forth) are not available. Avoid the use of sarcasm, idioms, jargon, slang, or other communication techniques that can easily result in miscommunication.
11. You should cut and paste links to website addresses (URLs) into your postings instead of typing them. This will reduce a number of common problems, such as transposed letters or missing periods in links.

Email

Email is certainly the most common online communication tool used in businesses. Despite the fact that you likely have a great deal of experience using email to communicate with friends, colleagues, and family, the unique aspects of using email in training courses should not be overlooked. Avoiding miscommunications and developing positive online relationships through email commonly require that you pay additional attention before pressing the “send” button.

12. Prior to sending email messages, carefully proofread the message, looking for misspelled words and grammar errors. For important emails, ask a co-worker, fellow student in the course, or friend to review the message first.
13. In order for the recipient to open a file that you have attached to an email, he or she must have a software application affiliated with the file (for example, the recipient must have Microsoft Word or a compatible application in order to view an attachment that you have created in Microsoft Word). Consequently, you should verify that the recipient has the necessary software before sending a file (many software providers also offer “viewers” that can be downloaded from their websites).
14. It is good online etiquette to ask before sending emails with large file attachments, as they may require the recipient to have substantial server space. If you have numerous large attachments, send them in separate emails.
15. Always review the To:, Cc:, and Bcc: fields prior to sending any email. Often, in a hurry to complete our training, we will mistakenly add (or omit) a recipient to an email message. This can be both embarrassing and sometimes destructive to the online relationships you have built (such as when an email to another student in the training course goes to the instructor, or vice versa).
16. If you are forwarding an email message that contains within the body of the email the names and email addresses of multiple recipients who also received the original email, take the time to remove those before forwarding the message.

Online Readings

While the typical training experience will introduce you to a variety of technologies (for example, real-time chat, asynchronous discussion boards, online video, and so on), you will still want to be a proficient and effective reader to find success in most

training courses. Increasing your comprehension when reading online materials is crucial to your success in any e-learning experience.

17. Identify the purpose of the online reading. Are you reading for knowledge and comprehension, critical evaluation, or practical application? Knowing why you are reading will help you establish the right reading skills and pace for gaining the most from the reading.
18. Preview the entire reading before starting the detailed reading. Take a few minutes to “skim” through the introduction, headings, tables, and summary before beginning the reading.
19. Become an active reader, asking questions of yourself and taking notes as you read through the materials.
20. When reading from a computer monitor, take breaks at least every 30 minutes to rest your eyes. Computer monitors can be especially tiring on your eyes when lighting is poor.

Conclusion

While many aspects of online learning are similar to those of the traditional classroom, significant differences in the skills required by e-learners in order to be successful should not be overlooked by organizations. By developing new learning approaches and study skills for the online classroom, as well as adapting some of the useful skills learned through experiences in traditional training, we can be better prepared for success. The twenty essential tips for e-learners provided in this article are based on just a few of the many suggestions, tactics, tools, and techniques provided in *E-learning Companion: A Student's Guide to Online Success* (Watkins & Corry, 2003).

References

Watkins, R., & Corry, M. (2003). *E-learning companion: A student's guide to online success*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

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