

HELPS Newsletter

Health Enhancement for Lifelong Professional Students at USF Health

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Online courses: How to get the most out of the experience

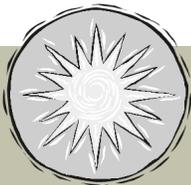
An online class can fit into your busy lifestyle, or it can take over your life. To learn what works—and what doesn't—HELPS talked to Steve Grothe, adjunct business instructor. Grothe has taught online courses for Upper Iowa University for 12 years. He shares his views and tips from the other side of the computer.

Be a Proactive Learner

"The best way to get started is to be proactive," says Grothe. "I'd advise learners to clear their calendars of distractions (to the extent possible), acquire the best equipment they can afford (especially fast Internet—it will pay dividends in time saved), and *have a plan*. That plan should integrate the learner's classes into their life, and detail what activities will be cut back to make time for school."

Grothe recommends that students become familiar with the platform their class will be using. "As soon as a student has access to the platform for that first class, jump in—even if class hasn't started. Learn to navigate, where stuff is, and how it all works."

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"Get to know the online library backward and forward, too. Researching at the graduate level is nothing like what learners have done for their undergrad degree."

Grothe has had many positive experiences with graduate level learners, he says. "From my side of the screen, grad students are better to teach—they tend to be a bit more seasoned, have formed effective study habits, and understand the concept of sacrifice to reach a goal. In most classes, they take the syllabus and run with it, form their own teams and manage themselves. It's a unique and fun experience the learners will enjoy."

Understand Time Commitment

One big misconception students have about online courses is that they'll take less time and are less work, Grothe notes. "This applies to all levels of online classes. The online classes actually take 30-50% more time than a bricks-and-mortar (B&M) classroom experience."

Not only do online classes entail the same academic challenges as B&M classes, there are technical issues as well. "Slow Internet speeds can turn a 1-hour study group into a 3-hour exercise in frustration," says Grothe. "If the class is totally asynchronous, there's always a wait until the team partner or instructor responds."

It can be challenging to get family and friends to understand that you need to give your online class your full attention. "Students should let others know they'll be out of circulation temporarily. It will be hard for some of them to deal with,



and the learner may have to be pretty blunt about it."

Habits of Successful Online Students

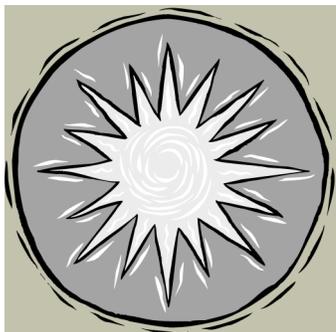
Grothe says he's found that his most successful learners already have some leadership experience under their belts and know how to get along with people of all walks of life. "They are good planners. They exhibit sound reading, writing and speaking skills. Good fundamentals go a long way at this level."

Successful online course participants work well independently, Grothe adds. "There may be no instructor on hand in a campus office. Thus, when questions come up at 11 p.m., a learner must be able to craft a way to keep moving forward until the instructor checks his or her email or voice mail.

Allow extra time for teamwork, Grothe advises. "An online learning team is kind of like an additional class. It requires its own commitment and block of time."

"Students should create time for study—reading *and* online library research—as well as the standard classroom participation, writing papers and so on," Grothe says. "Mentally, they should look for ways to associate what they are learning with the workplace or personal experiences. A good instructor, in fact, will take note of each learner's career field and experiences, and

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Online Courses: Tips for Students

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tailor some of the class and materials to that learner's specific needs.

Make the Most of Team Experience

Be prepared to work in teams, Grothe says. "Some learners just hate teams, but most schools have team exercises in each class. There's no way around it in the online classes, even if the learner's workplace isn't using teams, or never will. I look for learners who put their leadership skills and experiences to work in my classroom teams. We become partners, in essence, and things go much smoother.

Line Up Your Resources

"Every student knows what they 'don't know' by the time they get to any level of college," says Grothe. "I'd advise learners with deficiencies (say, a math-averse person) to have tutors lined up in advance. Don't wait until the last minute to seek help."

Get to know your way around the university's library building and how to reach its staff. You'll need these for more complex research projects. "Graduate

work will require higher level research and analysis – it's good to have a professional/academic librarian on hand when it's crunch time," Grothe notes.

Also know the style format for papers and research—whether that's APA, MLA or Chicago—and

have the full hard copy manual on hand. "Most graduate classes will be taught by Ph.D's, and those folks get cranky when references aren't complete and quotation marks are missing," Grothe says knowingly.

Predictors of Doom?

Online instructor Steve Grothe has seen learners succeed and fail. There are a number of warning signs that a student will not be successful, including these, he says:

- Writing papers from a cell phone/mobile device. The small screen and automatic spell-checker can impair writing and proofreading accuracy. Using mobile devices isn't necessarily a precursor to failure, but does require a higher level of attention to detail and proofreading to pull off successfully.
- Taking more than one online class at a time, while trying to work full time and manage a family, too.
- Working two jobs while carrying a full school load. This will be very, very difficult. Something has to give. Since it can't be our employment, and family needs are always paramount, school is usually what suffers in a time crunch.
- Unwillingness to give up family time or personal interests. This often results in frustration and less-than-expected quality schoolwork or participation in class discussions. School is school—even at the graduate level, and there's no way around it. Online classes tend to be accelerated, so why would a person think they could take the equivalent of a 12 week semester class in half that time, and not have to give up something?
- Unrealistic expectations. Take a step back, and pencil out how and when you will study, deal with work and family, etc.
- Taking a class without buying the textbooks.
- Regularly using "one stop shopping" knowledge websites such as Wikipedia, NetMBA, Marketingguru, studynotes.com, scribd, etc. to avoid research. When I find these in the reference list, I assume the learner is trying to avoid research and library work.

Resources

<http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2013/01/14/5-tips-to-succeed-in-an-online-course>

<http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2012/01/10/4-technology-must-haves-for-online-students>

<http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2012/01/13/4-time-management-tips-for-online-students>