How to Be a Successful Online Student

Table of Contents

How to Prepare for Your First Online Course

So you are embarking on a different way of learning – an online course. Good for you! Don't be nervous. Just follow these ten steps below to make your transition a little easier.

1. Make sure you have everything you need to start.

Locate the computer requirements document on the school web site. Make sure your computer fits the requirements and you have the right peripherals (printer, speakers, microphone, etc) and software (Adobe Acrobat to read .PDF files, Microsoft Word for writing papers, etc). Once you have those things in place, make sure they all work! **Hint**: most schools provide the software as downloads from their technical support page, so check that out before you buy software.)

2. Set aside some physical space for class.

Set aside some space in your home to keep your school stuff. It is important to have some organization, even if it's just two folders – a physical one for important papers and a folder on your computer where you put all your papers. Put your books, some blank paper, a pen, and a highlighter all in one place. (**Hint**: if you are planning to use multiple computers like one at home and one at work, buy a backpack to keep all you stuff in so it is portable and handy.)

3. Know the school landscape.

Just as if you were walking around a new campus, you will need to "walk" around your virtual campus to learn where things are. Log into the school website with your assigned login and password as soon as possible. Click on different links to see what is available and get a real feel for your school. (**Hint**: Most schools hide important student information behind a firewall to protect you, so you will need to have a login and password to access it.)

4. Visit the bookstore.

Once you've logged on, locate the bookstore and order your books for your course(s). (**Hint**: Sometimes it takes 10 days to get the book to you, so you want to do this right away.)

5. Find the important offices and contact information.

Locate any offices you might need, like the computer help desk, business office, the advising office, the department teaching your course, and the library. Lucky for you, you don't have to learn about the dining halls since your own kitchen will be the dining hall (and snack bar). Schools vary greatly in how their websites are laid out, but most provide links, numbers, and e-mails for all the services you will need as an online student. (**Hint**: Knowing where these things are will save you time and effort when you are trying to get information in a hurry.)

6. Find out where your class is located.

Locate the login and password for your course and the directions for logging in. Most of the time, your login and password for class will match your login and password for the school. (**Hint**: you don't want to find yourself without this essential information when the help desk is unavailable and you have your first assignment is due, so make sure you can log in, even if you can't access your course right away.)

7. Learn the layout of the classroom.

Check out the course website by logging into your course (or a demo course if your course is not available) and familiarize yourself with the space. Think of the space as a classroom. Click on all the links, check out the discussion board, the assignments page, the e-mail system, and anything else you can access just as if you were checking out the physical space of a classroom. Every online course is built in a course management system (WebCT®, Blackboard®, Angel®, Desire2Learn®, Sakai™, etc. - some schools have proprietary systems.) It is to your advantage to learn how to navigate the course before you begin class. (**Hint**: nothing adds to frustration more than having to learn how to do something or where to find something when you face a deadline.)

8. Scope out the course.

Find the syllabus and read it. This will give you an idea of what you are going to study, how much reading there will be, what kind of assignments you will be doing, and generally acquaint you with the professor's expectations. (**Hint**: knowing what to expect will help keep you focused and not overwhelmed.)

9. Post your introduction and find a friend.

Most online courses start by having the students write an introduction and posting it on the discussion or bulletin board. Its get acquainted time, so take advantage of it. Find someone in the class who you find interesting and send them a private e-mail using their school e-mail address. Let them know you like their posting and why. Keep it short and simple. (**Hint**: having a friend in an online class is important – you can compare notes, share thoughts and understandings of assignments, and be a little less alone in class.)

10.   Take a deep breath!

The first online learning experience can be a little intimidating for anyone, but once you get the hang of it, you will do fine. Colleges and universities spend lots of time and money developing online courses and the web site – much more than they do for classroom-based courses –just so online students will have a great experience. Remember to ask questions, enjoy the experience and most of all, remember to relax and breathe! (**Hint**: deep breathing is a way to relax your body.)

How to Set Up a Home Office for Online Learning

A separate space devoted solely to your online class will help you concentrate and, more importantly, stay organized.

This area should be designated only for academic work and test taking. Keep it clutter-free and comfortable. A room designated for studying will help you focus and stay on task.

These steps will assist you on deciding how to design and set-up a home office perfect for online learning!

1. Find some space.

If possible, try to dedicate an entire room to your new library/home office. Consider creating a dual-purpose room like a guest room/home office or setting a home office in an unused portion of the house like the attic or basement. Make sure your room has a door that closes; this will help cut down on noise and interruptions. By identifying a specific area or room as your home office, it sends a clear message: "When I am in here, it is because I am studying."

2. Pick a quiet location.

Road traffic is noisy, so try to pick a room that does not have a window facing a main thoroughfare. The kitchen is also a hotspot for noise: clanging dishes and pans; cupboards swinging shut; the refrigerator door being opened and shut. You may not notice small or repetitive noises now, but when you are reviewing for an exam or drafting a 15-page paper, these little distractions can have a big impact on your concentration.

3. Make it comfortable.

Consider your working style: do you want to feel energized and upbeat when you are studying or would you prefer a feeling of tranquility and reflection? If you want a feeling of stimulation or activity, paint the walls with warm yellows or chose red drapes for your window dressing. If you want serenity and calm: soothing, cool blue tones or deep, rich greens. If you want classic simplicity in your workspace, stick to taupe, grays and even chocolate-y browns. Do you like to stretch out while you take notes? Add some throw pillows or a beanbag. Don't be afraid to add some personality, but make sure that everything will help you stay productive. Too many pillows and you may find yourself curled up next to your laptop, asleep!

4. Choose appropriate furnishing and equipment.

To optimize your space, list all the items that must go into your home office. By doing this, you can plan the best layout for your room. Depending on the size of the space, you may need to take some measurements to ensure that everything will fit and that you won't feel crowded or uncomfortable. Think about what you may need:

- A desk and chair
- Desktop or laptop computer with an Internet connection (**Hint**: Don't place your computer in an area that receives direct sunlight or gets too warm. Electronics are temperature-sensitive, so make sure the room receives adequate air circulation and that the sun can't damage your equipment.)
- Printer, scanner, and/or fax
- Shelves for your books, binders, print-outs, and reference materials
- Filing cabinet(s)
- Floor lamps or desk lamps
- A bulletin/memo board to keep track of notes and other bits of information

5. Prevent distractions.

Distractions are plentiful, especially if you are a parent. A message board on the door or outside of your home office will help with communication (especially with older children). Signs like "Studying until 7:30," or "Preparing for exam at 8," will tell your spouse or kids what to expect, and prevents any unnecessary questions or interruptions like, "What are you doing?" or "Are you going to be done soon?"

6. Keep everything close at hand.

Have enough storage space to keep extras around. Items like: a dictionary or thesaurus, pens, pencils, notepad paper, printer paper, highlighters, 3-hole punch, stapler, book flags or sticky notes, etc.

7. Coping with noise.

The perfect room is one that is completely sound-proof, but that would require renovating! If noise is a problem, consider purchasing a white noise or sound machine for your home office. These machines produce sounds that drown out other distracting noises and can help keep you focused when you're reading, posting to your discussion board, writing and studying.

8. Maintaining your study space.

A messy area leads to lost materials and misplaced notes. Give everything a designated area on your desk and shelves; keep your files up-to-date. Remove dirty dishes after using them so that they don't pile up and consume precious space on your desk. By taking a few minutes every day to keep your work are neat and tidy, you can come home and start your work right away without searching for items or getting distracted by useless clutter.

9. Use your room for studying. Period.

Avoid the temptation to your home office for other projects. If you enjoy crafting, building models, knitting or anything else, do not bring them into your work area. Though these activities are great hobbies and smart stress-relievers, they will lure you away from your academic goals. Also, try to dissuade your children from using the space. It is okay to have a place you can call your own!

10.   Studying in a shared space?

Not everyone has space or an extra room in their home just for their studies. If you are studying in your living room, den or another shared space, be sure to communicate your needs to others. Maybe put up a sign that reads, "Quiet, please – Working," or "Reserving the Living Room from 8 – 10 tonight." If you are trying to write a paper in the kitchen, but you can hear the television in the next room, you may want to purchase noise-cancelling or noise-reduction headphones or ear plugs.

How to Write an "A+" Discussion Posting
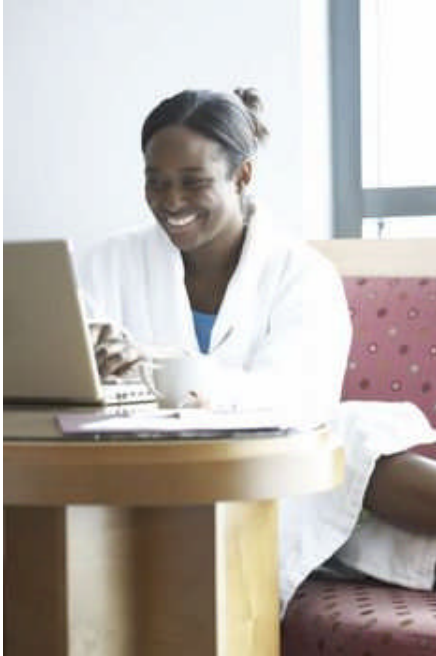
Whether you are a seasoned distance learner or are taking your very first online class, the online class discussion (also known as online bulletin board or message forum) is central to your online learning experience. So, you need to create a posting and you really want to ace this course.

What do you do to make your discussion posting worthy of an "A+"? Read on and find out.

1. Recognize the purpose of discussion postings.

In the classroom, students and professors hold discussions about the subject matter. Discussion postings duplicate this interaction when you are online. In the virtual classroom, you use the keyboard instead of your voice. (**Hint**: Make sure you keep a discussion tone about your writing - it's not another paper.)

2. Prepare yourself.

Before writing a single word, make sure you have prepared yourself by doing any course work required - reading, assignments, research, etc. (**Hint**: Reading and reflecting is what learning is all about and no one wants to read a post that rambles on and doesn't have a point, just like no one wants to hear a story like that in class.)

3. Read the discussion posting directions carefully.

What is it you are being asked to comment on? Make sure you know what you are supposed to write about. Sometimes it is a personal response, sometimes it is a chance to absorb the material by restating the ideas presented in the reading, and sometimes the discussion board is a combination of ideas. (**Hint**: Read all the related discussion questions before you start the reading and other assignments, that way the topic will be on your mind when you are studying.)

4. Think about your point.

What is it you want to say to your fellow classmates and your professor? Try to limit yourself to the topic and make sure your point is relevant. An "A+" posting will make that connection between the theories and ideas and real life. (**Hint**: You can always email your professor for clarification if you don't understand something, just do it early enough to get the post in on time.)

5. Gather your references.

Make sure to cite your references in your posting. Even if it is a discussion posting, not giving others credit for their work is plagiarism, so cite. Your citation doesn't have to be formal, just make sure others

can find the information from the citation; give the title, author, and date. (**Hint**: Have your references handy when you write your post, so it doesn't break your train of thought or slow you down.)

6. Write out your response.

Use the tools in your course management system to write your response, make special use of the preview tool and the spellchecker. (**Hint**: If you don't have those tools or are uncomfortable using them, use your favorite word-processing software or text editor, like Microsoft Word, and then copy and paste your posting to the discussion board.)

7. Follow the rules of discussion postings.

If you are supposed to write a response to the question and respond to other postings, make sure you do that and do it well (see number 8). To select the best posting to respond to, think about the classroom environment - if somebody said that in class, would you respond? If so, go for it. If not, move to the next posting. (**Hint**: Most courses have rules for discussions in the syllabus or course introduction; make sure to read these before writing that first post.)

8. Give meaning to your posts.

Don't ever write only "I agree" or "Good thought" or any other short response to another posting. Put in details. For example: "I agree with Brian" is way different from "I agree with Brian. I had a similar experience where Theory XYZ came into play…" and the second one will get you a much better grade than the first. (**Hint**: Remember that it's OK to disagree with a classmate's posting. But be polite if you disagree and make sure you explain why.)

9. Post on time.

Nothing is worse for a professor than reading through a lively set of discussion postings and finding the late ones at the bottom. It's like coming up to the professor after class to contribute your information. (**Hint**: If you are asked to post to a question and then respond to others do the first posting early and the responses towards the end of the time allotted for the assignment. You will be noticed if you start a good discussion.)

10. Express some of your "self" in the posting.

Sometimes a quick story makes a better point than a long ramble about the theory. Applying the class information to real life is what discussions are usually about. Sure, you took the quiz and know the information, but can you make the connections between real life and the information? (**Hint**: If you follow steps 1-9, you will put some of yourself in the posting without having to think about it!

How to Avoid Plagiarism

Simply put, plagiarism is the act of passing off someone else's idea or writing's as one's own.

Colleges and universities take academic dishonesty seriously and are very hard on students who commit plagiarism. Some possible consequences include receiving a failing grade for an assignment, failing the entire course, and even expulsion from school.

Copyright is the law put in place to prevent plagiarism. When someone copyrights something, it means they own the rights to copying that something. Many things are copyrighted - images, articles, books, poetry, and even ideas. But we all know laws are difficult to interpret without a degree from a law school, so how do you avoid copyright violations in college?

1. Understand what plagiarism is.

Plagiarism is theft, plain and simple. When someone creates a digital image, a written work, or gives a speech, they own it. If you use those same words or images and call them your own, you are stealing it. (**Hint**: Citing sources is the best way to avoid being accused of plagiarism.)

2. Learn what plagiarism isn't.

Plagiarism isn't using others people's work to support your ideas, plagiarism is not giving credit to the original artist. There are some things that are considered common knowledge, like the United States of America is on the North American continent, but if it's not as common as that, you should cite your sources. (**Hint**: Any support you give for an idea in a paper should be cited.)

3. Check out the rules regarding copyright.

Copyright laws protect artists and authors against plagiarism, but the copyright laws have just changed and higher education is still determining what the change means because digital media has created a significant impact on using other people's ideas. Generally speaking, you need to know to:

- Give credit where credit is due
- Ask for permission if you use more than 10% of something
- Refer people to an item rather than copying it

4. Learn how to properly cite references.

There are many citation styles - APA, MLA, MLHA, Chicago Manual of Style, Turabian, etc. Check out which one your college or university, division or school, or your professor, wants you to use. Purchase the manual for it, and read it. The general idea behind all citation styles is giving your readers (your

professor) the details they need to look up the source. (**Hint**: Most styles have templates you can download to help you cite and format your papers correctly.)

5. Collect your resources.

If you are writing a paper, collect your resources so you can cite them properly. If you borrowed a book or are writing your paper or doing your project over time, create a digital file of your resources. Make sure to know which information your citation style will ask for and if you use quotes, don't forget the page numbers. (**Hint**: Generally, you will need to cite the author, the title, any journal information, the publisher, the date, and the pages if your source is a quote or from a journal).

6. Learn how to paraphrase.

Ideally, your work should be original and you should use reference materials to support your ideas, so you should paraphrase as much as possible. Paraphrasing takes practice, but the basic method is read, think about it, and then restate it in your own words. (**Hint**: You should cite anything you paraphrase.)

7. "Over" cite - when in doubt, cite it.

Very few, if any, professors will dock you points on your paper for too many citations. In fact, most professors would be overjoyed to see citations in a paper. (**Hint**: If you have trouble with citations, check out any digital journal article from the library and see how it's cited. It may not be the right style, but you can get an idea of how citation is done.)

8. Check out Turnitin.com or some other plagiarism resource.

These helpful websites allow you to submit your paper to be checked for plagiarism for you before you turn it in to your professor. Many colleges and universities provide accounts to plagiarism resources to their students, so check out your school's policy. (**Hint**: If words are copied from another source, it's okay, just make sure you have the proper citation for it.)

9. Review, review, review.

Once you have written your work or completed your project, set it aside and then review it to make sure you have cited everything. (**Hint**: Waiting 24-48 hours can make all the difference in your paper because you will look at it with fresh eyes and can see your own errors.)

10.   Take advantage of your professor.

If your professor offers to read your draft and provide comments, make sure to take advantage of that service. Your professor will note where you need citation if you are missing any. (**Hint**: Writing a draft just means you are doing your paper or project early and it gives you time to make it perfect. A perfect paper gets you closer to an "A.")

How to Effectively Participate in a Live Chat Session

Now your professor wants you to attend a live chat session with some of your classmates - it's a chance to show your stuff, but how can you be effective?

1. Know the rules of netiquette.

Netiquette is simply respecting other people in the chat room. That means waiting until others are done "speaking", using appropriate language, and sticking to the subject. (**Hint**: Your school should have chat room rules posted. If you don't know them, ask your professor before the chat room starts.)

2. Check out the chat speed beforehand.

If you are on a dial-up connection, it may make the chat room exceedingly slow, which means when you type in a long sentence, the others in the chat room will be waiting to see what you are typing. If you are on dial-up and can't get high speed access, then let the chat room participants know, type only a few words before sending them, or write your responses in an editor and copy and paste them into the chat. (**Hint**: You can have two windows open at once, just use the minimize button at the top of your internet browser.)

3. Review the materials.

Think of your chat as a classroom debate. If your professor told you there would be a debate about a topic in class and you had to participate, you would make sure you knew the topic, right? Well, in a chat room, you need to do the same thing - know your topic. (**Hint**: Most professors will post the topic for the chat room beforehand in the assignments.)

4. Know the chat room signs and symbols.

Some schools, to facilitate a civil conversation, give certain signs and symbols special meanings. For example, an ellipses (…) sometimes is put at the end of a sentence to mean there is more to come. Find out what the recommended signs and symbols are before the chat starts. (**Hint**: If you don't know the signs and symbols and you type in the middle of someone else's thoughts, you will be seen as rude!)

5. Be patient.

Some people are very slow typists and others have dial up issues. Sometimes it takes a long time for a thought to get out, so be patient. Let your professor be the gatekeeper for the discussion. (**Hint**: If the chat is going really slowly, review your topic notes or have baroque music playing in the background to keep your mind active and focused.)

6. Read what your professor has to say.

In the beginning of each chat, most professors will go over the rules; let you know the order of the chat, the time limit for the chat, what's acceptable in the chat, etc. Pay attention to these comments. The chat room is a time where the professor sees you interact with others in real time. You want to make a good impression. One of the elements of grading a chat room is almost always about following directions. (**Hint**: A professor may not state the element of following directions, but it will affect the subjective part of your grade.)

7. Be on time.

Just be on time for your chat. In fact, be a little early so you can get the feel of the chat room. If you are going to be late, make sure you let your professor know ahead of time or see if you can reschedule. When you come to a chat late, it's like coming to a class late, everyone, including the professor, notices. (**Hint**: Most class chats are recorded, so the professor has the exact time you entered the chat in the transcript!)

8. Have your references on hand.

Make sure you have your paper, your textbooks, and any other documentation readily available, so you can refer to it to support your ideas or you can check your interpretation with the other students in the chat room. (**Hint**: If you want to reference something specific in a reading you know the whole chat room is using – like the textbook, just refer to the page; don't type the whole thing in.)

9. Avoid disruptions during the chat.

A chat room where the professor asks a student a question and gets no response, especially if the student has been responding quickly, indicates the student isn't there. It gets uncomfortable for everyone, so make sure your chat has your full attention. If given the option, select a chat time where you know you will not be interrupted, avoid the temptation to check your e-mail or you're my space page while in the chat room, and keep focused. (**Hint**: If the chat is just not moving fast enough for you, make notes on a sheet of paper about the ideas you are having during the chat.)

10. Expect the unexpected.

Even with the best of technology, something can go wrong. You could lose power, others could lose power, the website could go down, you might have to miss because of something unexpected at the last minute, etc. If something happens, don't panic. E-mail your professor as soon as possible. Be open and honest and ask how you can make up for your absence. (**Hint**: If the professor lets you copy the transcript and interject your comments – don't destroy the flavor of the chat by over stating your position because you have time. Just write your comments and ideas exactly as if you had stayed in the chat. No one likes a show off.)

How to Avoid Feeling Isolated in Your Online Course

In a traditional classroom, you meet your fellow students and faculty and create a real community; even it's only for the length of the class. You notice when your classmates look upset or even who is there and who is absent. That's part of the community; it makes you feel connected, and it is one of the more enjoyable aspects of college life.

So how do you get that same feeling in an online class?

1. Share a little personal information.

It can be about your family (Are you married? Do you have children or pets?) and your life (favorite hobbies, professional interests, top 5 movies, etc.) in either your bio page or the introduction post. If you are able to post a photo, do so. (**Hint**: Most course management systems reside behind a firewall so only your classmates, your professor and some of the administrators have access to this information and they are required by law to not share personal information, so it's a safe environment.)

2. Remember that your other classmates are in the same situation.

You are not the only one who feels some sense of isolation. Just like in a classroom, some people are shy and some are outgoing. It just takes one person to do a little reaching out to create a community and you can be that person. (**Hint**: Even if you are a little shy, you don't have to speak to get a community started online.)

3. Find a buddy.

In the beginning of class, find someone you'd like to get to know better and start up an email conversation with them. Its good to have a buddy in the class and it will help reduce your isolation. Keep your initial e-mail short and let the receiver know in the Subject line that you are from the same class. (**Hint**: If one person does not respond, find another person to e-mail.

4. Keep active in your class.

Visit your course on a regular basis, just like you were going to class. Keep up on the discussion postings, turning in your papers on time, and do the readings and activities. It will make you feel more connected if you are in the environment. (**Hint**: Make sure to respond to e-mails as you would like others to respond to yours.)

5. Talk to people outside the virtual classroom about your course.

Let your friends and family know you are taking an online course and share some of the things you are learning. Sharing will not only help you feel less isolated, it will help you absorb the information and

make your online work more exciting. (**Hint**: Don't bore people with your knowledge, just share a little about what its like for you.)

6. Use the course chat room or instant messaging.

If it's available, get to know your fellow students in the class chat room or through instant messaging. Ask your buddy to meet you at a certain time and use that time to informally discuss the class. Invite others into the conversation by sending an invitation to all your classmates - some may come and some may not. Your professor may notice and admire your commitment to the course which could translate into a better grade. If you have a team assignment, pick the chat room or instant messaging for one of your meetings. (**Hint**: Some chat rooms have a record feature and your professor and all your classmates can read the transcript, so keep your comments positive!)

7. Make the most of any group or team time.

If you are assigned to a team, make time to do your best on the assignment. Even if your team can only meet for 15 minutes every week during the team project time, do it. You should use the telephone, instant messaging, or the class chat room for your team time. Save the discussion board and e-mailing for exchanging files and polishing your group project. You will get to know your fellow classmates and get a better grade in everyone gets to know each other, even just a little bit. (**Hint**: Instant messaging, chat rooms, and telephone calls are synchronous, meaning at the same time, and discussion postings and e-mails are asynchronous, meaning not at the same time.)

8. Look for opportunities to meet other online students.

They don't have to be in the same class or even in the same university because there are many similarities when taking online classes anywhere. Local public libraries, community colleges, and other places are good starting points for locating students. If you are unable to find people in your community, look online or right here in the eLearners community. Even if you are not interested in replying to a blog or a commercial chat, you will probably see some of the same experiences you are having appearing in these places. (**Hint**: Check to see if your school hosts local meetings or events and attend them.)

9. Establish a relationship with your professor.

If you are truly interested in the subject you are taking, e-mail your professor some very well thought out questions about the subject. Most professors will answer and will be flattered you are thinking about the course beyond the assignments and activities. (**Hint**: Online professors can become mentors, reviewers, and references for later projects just like classroom-based professors.)

10. Wear your school colors with pride!

Purchase a sweatshirt with your online university's logo or slap a bumper sticker on your car. Believe it or not, just associating yourself with a school helps makes you feel a part of the school and once you feel part of the school, you will feel less isolated. (**Hint**: Most online bookstores will sell you logo items right along with your books!)

How to Survive Virtual Group Work

Most e-learners have mixed feelings about group work and the activities they've had to do with their classmates.

Perhaps you've had the same experience: you loved going to the discussion board and sharing ideas and discussing the course readings.

But, when you had to work with the same individuals on an online group project, it was another issue altogether.

The typical online group project involves the following steps:

1) The instructor assigns you to a group of three or four other students
2) You are expected to produce a group project together.
3) The project is usually gargantuan, and it requires the creation of a PowerPoint, text, and other presentation materials.
4) After you read the requirements, you e-mail your group members. No one responds.
5) You end up doing all the work yourself.
6) You swear that you will never work in an online group again!

Does that sound familiar? How can you succeed? Below are a few strategies to help you succeed with group work.

1. Bond with your team-members.

Ask group members to post photos, details about themselves that they'd like to share, and to start a discussion board or forum in which they discuss current events and items of interest.

Potential problem: No sense of community. There is a failure to bond, and hence a failure to thrive. Collaborations with this problem sometimes never get off the ground.

2. Clearly identify the work required.

Determine what the final outcome will look like. Avoid generalities and be specific early on.

Potential problem: Collaborative papers require "blending" rather than stand-alone components. The collaboration is expected to produce a paper that flows as though it were written by a single person. This can pose a monumental, even insurmountable, challenge because individual voices, writing styles, even format can be completely at odds. Further problems surface when individual team members resent the way that their work has been edited.

Solution: Develop structures that allow individuals to insert their own work in sections clearly identified as pertaining to them. Do not try to blend or mesh the parts.

3. Identify the tasks that you will need to do in order to accomplish the goal.

Potential problem: Irrelevant activities. Group members may resist doing activities they perceive to be irrelevant to the overall goal or objective they envisioned when joining the group. Even those who go ahead and do the activities may feel resentful.

Solution: Let the team members know how their work ties into the final objective (the project), and how it ties into a larger world as well.

4. Simplify the tasks and break them up in to individual steps.

Instead of envisioning one large group project, visualize the entire assignment as four or five smaller projects that will each require just two or three steps, rather than dozens.

Potential problem: The project contains too many steps to reach the final outcome. The complexity makes it difficult to understand and to delegate work, and to set achievable goals.

Potential problem: Resentment because of lack of work parity. Group members become angry because the work load is not evenly distributed. Some team members may be perceived as slackers or freeloaders, who take credit but refuse to pull their weight. The converse can also be true. There may be resentment because one team member will attempt to dominate and not allow individuals to participate in the process. The dominant person may be perceived as a bully, much to his or her surprise. She thought she was simply being efficient, proactive, and "Type A."

Solution: Listen. List the roles and the responsibilities and behaviors expected of each role. Then, assign tasks to specific team members, and develop a realistic set of due dates. Make sure that there are clear ways to be in touch with each other if there are questions.

5. Coordinate time.

Required collaborations do not reflect the real time commitments of the participants, nor do they reflect schedules or time zone differences.

Solution: Give the group at least a week to do each project, no matter how small. Ask the individual team members what they are doing to find out and accommodate each other's time constraints.

6. Develop a communications plan.

Try to communicate live-time if you can, either with instant messenger, chat, video chat, or with internet telephony, such as Skype®.

7. Admit it when there is friction between group members.

Get it out in the open. Then, develop a productive solution.

Potential problem: The way team friction manifests itself can be subtle. Group members disagree, express frustration, or stop communicating altogether. Some team members are deliberately obstructive, or criticize work, endlessly debate small points, or refuse to contribute at all. Instead of working on the problem, the energy of the group is spent in conflict resolution. Some may drop out. Others find they become passive when they believe that their input does not matter, and they let the dominant team members do the work.

Solution: Define the roles as well as the tasks. Provide guidelines for team-member roles, and describe actions to be taken by each member of the group.

8. Continuously review the tasks and see where you are with the deadlines.

Potential problem: Tasks are vague, poorly defined. Although the outcome may be defined and described well, the individual tasks are not clearly defined, nor are they delegated in an effective manner. Tasks are repeated needlessly, or done with contradictory results.

Solution: Define and describe the tasks in terms of what needs to be done, how to do it, and how to present the results.

9. Redefine the outcomes as you go, based on the types of work coming.

Make adjustments as needed.

Potential problem: No clearly defined goal or outcome. The overall goal or desired outcome may be imprecisely described or defined. It is important to clearly define the concrete attributes: length, structure, content, purpose, format, complexity.

Solution: Make sure that the outcome and goals are as clearly defined as possible. "SMART" goal-setting is ideal: Specific, Measured, Achievable, Reasonable, Time-based. Of course, there are downsides to having rigidly defined outcomes. They can inhibit extremely creative and driven students, and they can result in conformity and mediocrity.

10. Build in rewards for working with each other.

Make sure that each person clearly perceives that there exists a clear reward for the effort expended in the group work.

Competitive rather than collaborative. Group members are caught up in proving that they are "right" and that the others are not. They do not want to modify any of their work in order to have it mesh or blend with the others in order to produce a coherent whole.

Solution: Separate the tasks and roles so that there is division of labor, rather than overlap.

How to Conduct Online Research

Electronic resources abound, and they can be of very high quality. The best way to find peer-reviewed, high-quality journal articles is to access them through your online library, or to purchase the articles through an article provider.

However, there are excellent sources that are both accurate and of high quality on the web, and they are often free and not password protected.

Whether you are looking for journal articles, monographs, factual information, or high-quality publicly available resources, the same principles apply. Narrow your topic, make sure your search terms are relevant and focused, make sure your articles and your topic are in alignment, examine your sources for bias and distortion, and finally, make sure that your research provides sufficient support and background for your argument.

Let's expand the steps and look at them again. It is useful to look at each of the stages individually and to think about how and why you will be engaged in activities.

1. Define your topic.

Narrow it down, but don't constrain it too much. Develop a solid thesis statement that gives you room to develop an argument. This is a great time to do brainstorming. Clusters, mind maps, concept maps, decision trees, and free-writing are all very effective.

2. Determine what fields of study your research question will address.

Identifying the fields of study will help you determine which journals and subject or field-specific databases to search.

3. Make a list of items that interest you about the topic.

For example, you may be required to write an essay on an aspect of Hamlet in your English class. At first, you feel overwhelmed. Later, however, you think about the characters and situations that most interested you and you recall that Ophelia's speech and then her subsequent death were interesting to you. You wondered about the psychological state, and how she was perceived by the others in the play. Does her situation illustrate something essential about the human condition? You don't have any idea, but you'd like to explore it. So, you start by looking into what others have said about Ophelia in Hamlet. You find that her madness and death reflect and reinforce the overall themes of death, madness, murder, and betrayal. How does Ophelia's madness contrast with Hamlet's? You start jotting down ideas and key words. These will help you develop search terms and to focus your search by going to the correct types of journals and publications.

4. Narrow your topic.

This requires another round of brainstorming, but this time you will be focusing on what others have written. List terms, ideas, and concepts that occur to you, and then focus on the subcategories that you find most interesting. Then, use the list to narrow your topic. Avoid worn-out subjects and ones that are too narrow or too broad.

5. What have others said? What are the debate points?

As you conduct preliminary research in the library, you will find books and articles on your topic. As you read the material, try to form an idea of what the major issues have been in the discussions about your topic.

For example, if your topic is on how stem cells could treat Lou Gehrig's Disease, you will need to have an idea of who the first people who started researching the topic. You will also need to identify the sides of the argument. Who is for it? Who is against it? Why? What are the issues?

Once you have a sense of the main players, you can start to do searches based on author name as well as key words or topics.

Ironically, in some cases, you may even have to be aware that the site may not have the original version of the information you're citing. They may, in actuality, be borrowing from another site. This is particularly the case with websites and services that subscribe to weblogs or where the information is mirrored because they have chosen to pull the entire article in the feed.

6. Evaluate your material.

How do you determine if a source of information is of high quality? Even if you are obtaining your data from a library database such as LexisNexis®, you should be aware that the articles contained in the newspapers they have in their database could be biased.

If it has advertising or links indicating that the owner is a member of an affiliate program on it, does such activity automatically make the site untrustworthy? In the past, it might have been an automatic disqualifier to see links to advertising, sponsors, or affiliate programs that pay the website owner a few cents for referrals. However, one can not make such assumptions now. In fact, the presence of affiliate links may indicate that the website is a labor of love, and that there are no ideological or commercial ties. Further, the lack of commercial ties may actually be a negative factor because it may mean that the enterprise is so profitable, or the ideological motivations are so strong that there are numerous well-endowed backers, or a highly successful business model.

Here are a few considerations as you evaluate your sources.

- **Refereed journals.** This is an academic journal that requires all articles to be reviewed by experts in the field. They require revisions and will reject articles if they do not meet standards.
- **Books and serial monographs.** In this case, it depends on the publisher and whether or not they evaluate, judge, and critique the material to assure that only the most reliable are published.

- **Series sponsored by an association or reputable group.** These are very common in the humanities, particularly in the hosting of content in the public domain.
- **Wikis and collaborations.** Variable quality. They can be extremely good and reliable, but the quality, quantity, depth, and breadth will be variable, as will be the scope of the contributions. There can be bias, distortion, or gaps (lacunae) in information.
- **Weblogs and personal / corporate websites.** Some are absolutely brilliant. Others are dismal. One can use the information, but it must be approached with care and extreme caution.
- **Term paper repositories.** Needless to say, we have not mentioned termpapers.com and other places that will sell you a term paper, or will allow you to share term papers with others. These are not the only unreliable sources of information in the Internet. It goes without saying that you should not use these, unless you're just determined to commit academic misconduct. You could cite them correctly, but they probably aren't the best source, unless your paper is about the traffic in term papers online.
- **Summaries, overviews, and study guides.** I, like everyone else, love Pink Monkey®. However, I would think twice before actually citing it in a paper. I think that the best way to use Pink Monkey.com®, Cliff Notes®, Wikipedia®, etc. is as a point of departure. Use them to gain an appreciation of your subject and to orient yourself. However, the information can be very imprecise and inaccurate, particularly in their plot summaries. They leave out details and discussion points that may be precisely the ones that you need.
- **Student postings, peer-to-peer downloads of notes, texts, etc.** These are excellent if you're interested in seeing how students write papers, and they can serve either as guides or as cautionary tales.
- **Parody websites.** Believe it or not, some students have actually cited information from parody sites as fact! TheOnion.com® comes to mind. This is a site that masquerades as a legitimate news site, but is, in fact, pure parody. How can you tell if a site is a parody, or so biased that the information it contains is unusable? Compare the information with others. Does it seem outlandish or extremely biased? Look at least three or four sites.

7. Organize your sources, articles, and notes.

After you have found your articles, be sure to organize them so that you have a sense of where they will go in your paper. Keep your primary thesis in mind, and the points you are trying to make and will support with evidence and research findings from your articles.

This is a good time to return to your outline and to start mapping out where you plan to use your sources and citations.

8. Create an annotated bibliography.

As you download and read your articles, you can keep track of them by creating an "electronic notebook" which would consist of a citation of your sources. Create an entry for each source. Use the appropriate style (MLA, APA, CBE, Chicago, etc.). After you have completed that, be sure to write a one-sentence overview / summary of the article and how it relates to your topic. After you have completed this, you will have, in effect, an annotated bibliography.

9. Update your outline.

Re-examine your thesis. Look at your argumentation structure. Does each paragraph and subsection help support your thesis? How does your research fit? Determine where you have gaps, redundancies, or where your sources take you on a tangent.

10. Fill in the gaps.

Make a list of the places in your paper where you need additional support for your argument. Then, after eliminating redundancies, map where you need to fill gaps, and where your argument needs additional support.

Databases for Individual Use

Some require a subscription, others have free content and pay-per-article sales.

⌖ **Questia**^{SM}
http://www.questia.com/
Questia^{SM}'s database contains, according to their website, "the world's largest online collection of books and journal articles in the humanities and social sciences, plus magazine and newspaper articles." We've known quite a few students who swear by the Questia^{SM}, and use it faithfully for their research. We believe that this is a very good option for undergraduates taking general education courses, who may not have easy access to a robust online library.

⌖ **Highbeam**$^{®}$
http://www.highbeam.com/
Highbeam$^{®}$ has some of the same journals and magazines as Questia^{SM}, but there seems to be somewhat different coverage. There are more magazines and newspapers, and Highbeam$^{®}$ seems to have fairly good coverage in education, health and science.

⌖ **FindArticles™**
http://www.findarticles.com/
LookSmart™'s Find Articles is a great database, with quite a few free articles. The journals include business, humanities, social sciences, health, and science.

⌖ **Pathfinder.com**
http://www.pathfinder.com/
This is the portal for Time$^{®}$, Discover$^{®}$, Fortune$^{®}$, Sunset$^{®}$, Parenting$^{®}$, People$^{®}$, TeenPeople$^{®}$, and more. Unfortunately, one must pay for many of the archived articles, but it's a great source, particularly for current events and issues.

Library Databases

These are probably too numerous to list, but we're going to list ones that are particularly helpful for students who are seeking peer-reviewed articles and statistics.

⌖ **Proquest**$^{®}$
http://www.proquest.com/

With databases of articles tailored to meet the needs of students and faculty at different levels and institutions, Proquest®'s resources are targeted and easy to use.

EBSCO Information Services®
http://www.ebsco.com/
Most online libraries subscribe to at least one of the EBSCO® databases. They have excellent coverage of interdisciplinary journals. While the full-text options may be a bit limited, the citations, with key words and publication data can help one obtain the article from other sources.

Ovid®
http://www.ovid.com/
Ovid® has absolutely a dizzying array of databases and information products. Their medical databases are expensive, but indispensable to many.

LexisNexis®
http://www.lexis-nexis.com/
Best-known for its database on legal publications, LexisNexis® has extensive holdings in newspapers. It is an excellent source for current information and syndicated content.

Wilson Web Databases®
http://www.hwwilson.com/
The old green "Readers' Guides" are now available at one's fingertips, and with full-text versions. The Wilson Web Databases® include journals and publishers that are not always easy to find, particularly in business and agriculture.

- Education Full Text
- General Science Full Text
- Humanities Full Text
- Readers' Guide Full Text
- Social Sciences Full Text
- Wilson Business Full Text

JSTOR®: The Scholarly Journal Archive
http://www.jstor.org/
JSTOR® has an amazing collection of humanities and interdisciplinary journals. Perhaps what is most exciting about this collection is that the older journals are being digitized and included, which means that there is much less reliance on interlibrary loan. An article about JSTOR® appears here: Bowen, William G. "The Academic Library in a Digitized, Commercialized Age: Lessons from JSTOR." Online. Available: http://www.jstor.org/about/bowen.html.

Emerald® Full-Text
http://www.uwp.edu/departments/library/journals/databases/emerald.htm
This tends to have a business and management orientation. The journals are excellent, and the interface is easy to use.

Project Muse®
http://muse.jhu.edu/
Originating at Johns Hopkins university libraries, this is one of our favorite databases. The articles are full-text, and they cover very interesting journals in the humanities.