



Welcome to MSU-Northern's

Extended University

A Student's Guide to Learning Online

Online learning offers many benefits, including the convenience and flexibility to fit coursework into your busy schedule and unique lifestyle. You choose when and where you will study. Learning online, however, isn't right for everyone. The traditional classroom experience provides the best learning environment for some students, while online learning can be very advantageous for others.

Before enrolling in an online course, you should consider your personality, learning style, skills, resources, schedule, wants, and needs. Below are a number of important features of online learning that you should understand, as well as issues regarding your personality traits you need to consider, before enrolling. Also included is valuable advice from experienced online students you should heed if you choose to pursue learning online.

- While online courses offer the convenience and flexibility to fit coursework into your schedule, conversely the reduced structure requires you to take greater responsibility for your learning. You need to make a commitment, self motivate, and exercise self discipline in order to succeed. Strong organizational and time management skills are also essential.
- Do not expect online courses to be easier or less time consuming than face to face courses. In fact, you should expect to work harder and dedicate as much as ten to fifteen hours per week per course (for a traditional three credit, fifteen week course). You will also need a private, quiet place where you can study without interruptions.
- Expect to log-in to each of your courses on a

daily basis, or at least three to five times each week. If you get behind on reading and posting messages, you will have extreme difficulty catching up. Procrastination is the downfall of many students in the online learning environment.

- Online courses typically depend heavily upon reading and writing independently. Students who enjoy reading and writing and who are self-motivated are most likely to succeed in online courses.
- Students with strong written communication skills have a definite advantage in the online learning environment. Conversely, students who have depended upon strong oral communication skills might struggle in the beginning. Students with poor writing skills should consider taking a remedial writing course before they enroll in an online course. No one should be lazy or sloppy about spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc. within the online learning environment, as many other students will find this distracting.
- Online courses allow time for you to carefully consider and construct your responses. Likewise, they allow others to carefully consider and respond to your postings, so be careful about what you write. Be sure to take full advantage of this characteristic of the online learning environment.
- Many social barriers (e.g., stereotypes and prejudices) are removed in an online learning environment along with the visual and environmental factors of the traditional classroom. Use this characteristic to be more open and communicative. Introverts especially find that





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online learning is to their advantage.

- Participate in online discussion boards, chat sessions, and e-mail listservs to communicate with classmates and avoid feelings of isolation. You will soon look forward to reading other students' and instructors' postings to which you would like to reply and reading other students' and instructors' replies to your postings. Much of the learning online occurs through participation in these group discussions. Get involved early and often!
- Be polite and respectful. Maintain a friendly, open, and safe learning environment for all participants. Remember that you are still communicating with people who have feelings, not machines, and that learning occurs best in a safe and supportive learning community.
- In the online learning environment, there is no non-verbal communication. That is, your instructors cannot "see" whether you are confused, bored, or enthralled. Therefore, you need to actively communicate and participate in the course. The chances are always good that another student is having the same experience, idea, question, or problem as you are. In a supportive learning environment, students confirm each other's experiences and help answer each other's questions.
- Before you enroll in an online course, you need to have a reasonable level of technology skills. If you are not comfortable with such basic skills as e-mailing attachments, searching the Internet, and using Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, consider taking a remedial computers class before enrolling in an online course.
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to have access to reasonable level of technology resources. The suggested minimum hardware/software requirements for online courses are as follows (discounted pricing of some software is available to currently enrolled MSU-N students from the MSU-Northern Bookstore):

- ◆ Microsoft Windows 2003, XP Service Pack 2;
- ◆ Microsoft Office XP or Vista;
- ◆ Adobe Reader 9.1 (a free download is available at the following link: <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>);
- ◆ Current antivirus software (e.g., Norton or McAfee Antivirus);
- ◆ Internet Explorer 7.0 with Java script and Cookies enabled; and,
- ◆ A 56K modem (Note: while a 56K modem and dial up connection will be sufficient for most courses, if a particular course requires uploading or downloading of large files we strongly recommended that you select a broadband Internet connection, such as DSL or cable modem).

Note: These are *suggested* minimum requirements which will minimize any technical difficulties you might experience with your online courses. Perform a system check at the Desire2Learn log-in page (<http://msunonline.org>) to verify whether your computer will actually operate efficiently with Desire2Learn.

- Finally, be sure to read, understand, and follow course syllabi carefully. Course policies, assignments, schedules, etc. will be spelled out in your course syllabi. If you don't understand something in the syllabus, be sure to ask your instructor immediately. Don't wait until it's too late!

