

STUDENT GUIDE TO ONLINE LEARNING

School of Education
Regent University



Student Guide to Online Learning

The purpose of this guide is to offer information and resources necessary for successful completion of your online studies. Areas such as Blackboard navigation, communication, and time management are included. Throughout the guide there are hyperlinks to relevant websites or online documents. Each of these links contains information designed to supplement what's being discussed in this guide.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

It's important that you understand how your course is organized. Blackboard offers several areas/features to help you locate information. Although not all instructors use each and every area of Blackboard to the same extent, most will use the following areas:

Announcements

The **Announcements** section is the first page you will see when you login to a course on Blackboard. This is where the instructor will post important messages, updates, and other information you need. You should check the course site regularly to ensure that you do not miss important information.

Start Here

The **Start Here** section contains information on general School of Education policies and procedures, as well as our Conceptual Framework, Mission & Vision, Declaration of Values, and Statement of Commitment. In addition, biographical and contact information for your instructor(s) is located in this section.

Syllabus

The **Syllabus** section contains the course syllabus. Many instructors also post the schedule of readings and activities. When you access your course, you should click on the Syllabus link to view and print a copy of any relevant documents.

Course Content & Activities

The **Course Content & Activities** section is where professors usually provide resources for use in completing assignments or to shed further light on subjects being discussed in class. There will often be several documents for students to download and view. These documents are generally in the form of PowerPoint presentations, Word files, or graphic images.

Assignments

The **Assignments** section often provides additional guidelines and tips for successfully completing the assignments in the course. Although assignment information is included in the course syllabus, your instructor may use this area to give you additional assignment details, sample assignments, etc.

Community

The **Community** section is used to facilitate connectedness and a sense of community within the online learning environment. This area generally has four discussion forums:

- Introductions Forum – This discussion area is used as a means for students to introduce themselves to their instructor and classmates.
- Questions/Comments Forum – This discussion area is used as a means for students to post questions/comments regarding the course syllabus, schedule, assignments, etc. The instructor will answer within the discussion forum so that everyone in the class can view the answer.

- Prayer Requests Forum – This discussion area is used as a means for students to post any prayer requests or praise reports they would like to share with the class.
- Coffee Shop Forum – This discussion area is used as a means for students to “talk” informally among themselves about topics unrelated to course content. Although all instructors have access to this forum, they generally do not read or respond to anything posted in this area. As such, you should not use the Coffee Shop Forum for course-related questions but rather than Questions/Comments Forum.

Dialogue

The **Dialogue** section (which could be labeled *Discussion, Collaboration, or something similar*) is used to for all content-related discussions that are assigned throughout the semester.

Instructors will require students to participate in online discussions within a specific timeframe, such as a new discussion every week or every other week. Your instructor will provide more details about where and how often to post to the discussion boards.

Check my Grades

Each course will contain a link students may use to access the online gradebook. Instructors will update the online gradebook at the conclusion of each required discussion period, as well as grades once assignments have been submitted and reviewed.

COMMUNICATION

When communicating online, many of the cues normally used to discern meaning and intent are absent within an online environment. Consequently, there are certain aspects of online communication that students should be aware of as they begin the process of communicating via distance.

- Students and groups communicating in an online environment are relatively more uninhibited. Online students and group members are generally more willing to disclose personally sensitive information about themselves than students in face-to-face interactions. [NOTE: This means that although you may feel more willing to share personal or sensitive information, remember that it will remain on the discussion board throughout the duration of the course, and everyone in the class will have access to it. This does not mean you shouldn't share with your classmates, just don't put anything on the discussion board that you don't want your instructor and/or every other student to read.]
- Online consensus/decision-making takes significantly longer than when group members interact face-to-face. Tendencies to be interactive and outspoken in electronic discussions sometimes lead to increased group conflict, which makes it more difficult for online students to reach agreement. [NOTE: This means that as you work together on group assignments/projects, give yourself and your group plenty of time to work through the discussion and decision-making process. Be willing to yield to others (graciously) if the situation warrants, and don't let your feelings get hurt if the group chooses another idea/suggestion over yours.]

The WRITE Way to Communicate Online

The WRITE way involves communicating online in a manner that is (W)arm, (R)esponsive, (I)nquisitive, (T)entative, and (E)mpathetic. Here's an explanation of each component:

Warmth

Words on a screen are two-dimensional. Reading these words in isolation of nonverbal communication cues lends itself to “coolness” that can lead to overreaction. Online communicators sometimes lose perspective – acting as though messages are going into the relative privacy of a text file saved to the user's hard drive, rather than being downloaded and read by the entire class. People, in turn, read two-dimensional words in isolation, misinterpret fuzzy language, or overreact to what's being said.

Increasing warmth means to decrease the psychic distance among communicators. Being warm online is a way of reminding everyone in the class that it is people who are engaged in communication. There are several effective ways in which to improve online warmth.

- Use the telephone when necessary. Phoning your instructor or classmates to clarify a point or to negotiate a particularly sensitive issue should occur when email just does not cut it.
- Send sensitive information to private mailboxes. Don't post complaints on the discussion board—email them privately to the instructor or a class member.
- Incorporate warmth into written text. It is helpful to write about family, hobbies/interests, the setting from which you are writing, the weather, etc. [NOTE: Most instructors set up an informal discussion area for students to post this type of information. This area is great for introducing yourself and finding out more about your classmates.]

Responsiveness

Online communication is usually asynchronous (all users communicate and work online, just not at the same time). As such, responses between parties can take hours, if not days. Check the syllabus to see how long your instructor's normal response time will be. This may change if the instructor is out of town or otherwise unavailable, so watch for announcements that indicate as much.

Inquisitiveness

Defensiveness is reduced if people ask questions rather than make statements. It is usually more constructive to ask a person *why* than it is to tell a person *what*. You need to be aware of this in responding to your classmates' or instructor's postings. It's fine to disagree with what someone says, as long as you do it in a respectful, constructive manner. Asking clarifying or probing questions is a good way to achieve this.

Tentativeness

Defensiveness is reduced when people hear or read, “It appears that...” as opposed to, “It is...” Inquisitiveness and tentativeness work well together. A question, framed in a tentative manner, reduces defensiveness and can also contribute valuable information (e.g., “Don’t you think it’d be better if we...?”). It’s fine to disagree with what someone says, but try to frame your disagreement so that it reduces the other person’s defensiveness.

Empathy

An important aspect of online communication is to put yourself in the other person’s shoes. It’s the basic golden rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” In other words, respond to your instructor and classmates with the same tone and respect you want from them.

[Adapted from: Lewis, C. (2000). Taming the lions and tigers and bears: The WRITE way to communicate online. In K.W. White & B.H. Weight (Eds.), *The online teaching guide: A handbook of attitudes, strategies, and techniques for the virtual classroom* (pp. 13-23). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.]

NETIQUETTE

Proper form (following the rules) is important in most human undertakings. This advice is based on a 1994 post concerning “netiquette” from *Time Magazine’s* website. Although old, these suggestions are still relevant to the ways in which we communicate via our Blackboard courses.

- *Keep your posts brief and to the point.*
- *Stick to the subject of a particular thread or classroom discussion.* Occasionally, your discussions will spill over into areas that don’t directly relate to the topic at hand. Try to keep these instances to a minimum by staying focused on the topic and writing in a clear and concise manner.
- *If you are responding to a message, quote the relevant passages or summarize it for those who may have missed it.* It helps everyone follow the thread of the discussion if you use quotes and/or summarize the portions you are responding to. This makes the discussion flow more quickly and smoothly.
- *Do not type in all caps.* (Others may perceive it as “shouting” and consider it rude.)

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Software

All students are required to have Microsoft Word and PowerPoint. For a complete list of computer hardware and software requirements, visit

<http://www.regent.edu/it/helpdesk/document/standards.cfm/?step=1>.

Login and Password

Your username, password and email address are provided by the University's Enrollment Department. Once you have that information, you can use it to login to your MyRegent Portal, which will allow you to easily access email, Blackboard, Genisys, and other University systems.

Email

We recommend that all students use their Regent University email account for all official correspondence. Students are responsible for regularly checking their Regent email for important messages and announcements sent from instructors and various departments within the University. Although students have the option to forward email to other accounts (i.e., Yahoo, Cox, etc.), this **is not recommended** and has resulted in numerous problems. One of the biggest problems has been the filtering of important university messages as spam by other email servers. Students choosing to use these accounts against the recommendation of the University should be sure their account's spam filtering option is turned OFF or set to its LOWEST mark. The School of Education is not responsible for student messages that are forwarded to other accounts.

Technical Assistance

There are two primary ways to get help for Blackboard, Genisys, email, and other areas:

Jackie Bruso
Coordinator of Distance Programs
School of Education
757-352-4259
jbruso@regent.edu

Information Technology Department (Help Desk)
757-352-4076
help@regent.edu or bbsupport@regent.edu

Tips for Success

- 1. Dedicate this semester to God and expect Him to guide you through this course.**
Depending on the experiences you've had with formal education, you may be surprised to hear that learning is a gift from God and He wants to be intimately involved in the process. As a result, we should seek Him to strengthen and enlighten us throughout this process. Ask Him to help you understand the concepts and appropriately apply the knowledge so that you can be successful.
- 2. Online learning isn't as difficult as it appears.** In your online courses, you won't be required to be online at a certain day or hour, so you can complete your weekly assignments at a time convenient for you. Even though you don't have the advantage of face-to-face meetings with a professor and students on a regular basis, you can access learning materials and interact with others from wherever you have Internet access. There are several ways to communicate with fellow learners: e-mail through the course site, comments posted in the various discussion areas, phone calls, faxes, and face-to-face meetings if you're in the same geographical area. So, rather than considering your courses as distance courses, think of them as web-enhanced learning experiences. Communication bridges the distance gap, so use every medium necessary to develop relationships and deepen your understanding of the course content.
- 3. Online learning isn't as easy as it seems.** Our online courses are not independent study experiences. Although you have to demonstrate self-direction, time management abilities and initiative in online learning, courses have well-defined beginning and ending dates, weekly assignments and deadlines, and assessment activities that are similar to on-campus course requirements. Consequently, successful students may find that they spend more time on their online studies than in traditional situations because reading assignments, discussions, and class interactions are primarily text-based.
- 4. Establish some study routines at the beginning of the semester.** Very few adults have the luxury of studying fulltime. Consequently, most of us are juggling work, family, church and social responsibilities while attempting to complete our education. This adds a measure of stress that can be managed with effective study habits. The stress level may be heightened as you organize your schedule at the beginning of each semester, but it will pay off in the long run.
- 5. Get help when you need it.** We've all heard it said that the "best laid plans...oft go astray," so if you're aware of any situations that will prevent you from completing your assignments on time, or if you have an emergency, please let your instructor know as soon as possible. Like you, instructors are juggling a variety of responsibilities, so they realize that it's important to extend grace in certain situations. Your instructor will work with you to accommodate your needs as much as possible within the context of course requirements, thus giving you a better chance of staying on track with the class. Alternately, if you don't

communicate your needs, your instructor can't provide the assistance that will help you be successful.

6. **Read the syllabus carefully and refer to it frequently throughout the semester.** The syllabus provides the bulk of your course information and is the guiding document for the course. Become familiar with the learning objectives, methods of assessment, and deadlines.
7. **Remember that electronic communication can create misunderstandings.** Since most of your courses will not meet face-to-face, let's be aware of the power of the written word and use that power in love and humility. Every student and instructor should model professional and biblical standards in their conversations, respecting the diversity of thought and experience we all bring to the online classroom. This doesn't mean that we shirk from the truth, but it means that we debate ideas and concepts graciously.
8. **Online discussions are vital to accomplishing the learning objectives.** The use of online discussion approximates discussion experiences in on-campus courses, but also offers more than the traditional format. In face-to-face classes, you rarely have the opportunity to reflect on the question before answering, and the conversation may move so quickly that only a few people have the chance to participate. In online courses, you'll have access to the questions in advance and time to create an informed, rational response. However, don't wait to respond until 11 pm on the last day of the discussion. The purpose of the online conversation is to foster an ongoing dialogue that develops deeper understandings of course material. If you post your responses at the last possible moment, you lose the value of conversation and interaction with others in the class.

By understanding and incorporating these guidelines into your learning process, you can expect to be successful in your online endeavors.

[Adapted from Dr. Shauna Tonkin's online course materials, August 2004]