

4 Time Management Tips for Online Students

Procrastinators, learn how to stay on top of your online classes.

Online courses give students the flexibility to take their class anytime, anywhere. The trick, students say, is staying on top of them.

Doing so requires discipline, commitment, and organization—traits any successful student should possess, no matter what path they're taking to complete their degree.

"Being a good student, whether you're online or in person, are pretty much similar things," says Tamara Popovich, associate director of student services for ASU Online, the distance learning arm of Arizona State University.

But unlike their peers in the classroom, who have regular face time with instructors, online students receive no in-person reminder of when papers are due or tests are scheduled.

"The big myth is it's easier to go online, because you can do it at your own pace," Popovich says. "You do have more flexibility, but it's not any easier ... It's harder, because you're on your own; you're left to your own devices."

A need for flexibility is one factor fueling the growth in online education—online enrollment hit an all-time high in 2010 with more than 6.1 million students—but a lack of direct oversight can make it easy for them to fall behind.

Throw in everyday distractions typical for an online student—full-time jobs, kids, family activities—and the work can easily pile up. These time management tips from online learning veterans can help you stay ahead of the game:

1. Make a plan: Online students need structure, and a study calendar is a great way to create it.

Check your syllabus before your course kicks off, and commit to due dates on your calendar. Then, designate study times for each class, and stick to them.

"I set aside a specific block of time every day, usually after the kids' bedtime, to work on my classes," says Natalie Fangman, mother of three and an online nursing student at Northeast Iowa Community College in Peosta. "I treat that time just like I would if I were in the actual classroom."

Sticking to her plan helped her juggle work, family, and multiple online courses without falling behind, Fangman says.

2. Check in daily: One draw of online classes is that students only need Internet access to connect to their courses.

If you have an iPhone or Android device, leverage it to stay organized, Robinson Grochett recommends.

"With all of the mobile devices we have, somebody can go to a baseball game and still be checking in," she says. "Not necessarily doing full-blown homework—just checking in and staying current."

Turning school into a daily activity makes it less overwhelming, and it prevents students from getting caught off guard by syllabus changes, says ASU Online's Popovich.

"Getting into a rhythm helped keep me on schedule and, most importantly, fight my urge to procrastinate," says Alex Bonine, who took online classes while earning his bachelor's in electrical engineering at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg.

3. Look ahead: Knowing what is due in six weeks, not just the next day, can help students maximize their time.

"Many times people don't read ahead to see what's next, so what they end up doing is replicating work that they've already done," she says.

And once you know when an assignment is due, don't wait until the day before to start working on it.

"If you have class, and you know it's due Tuesday night, well, don't make Monday night your night that you're going to finish your homework," Robinson Grochett says. "Sunday is a great day to say, 'I'm gonna go ahead and knock it out.'"

4. Speak up: If you struggle or fall behind, don't stay silent.

"Students are always hesitant to ask for help," says Popovich, with ASU Online. "They start to drown and they take drastic measures, or they don't take measures at all. Either way, they end up making a mistake."

Instructors may offer wiggle room with deadlines or extra credit if a situation warrants it, and most online programs have teams of counselors and advisers to help you along the way—but students need to be proactive, Popovich says.

Even if the course seems like a total loss, Popovich says there is someone who can help.

"We don't want them to fail miserably. There's always a middle ground," she says. "Let's rescue what we can, and then move forward from here."