

# Online Learning Guide

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# How to Prepare for Your Online Course

*Adapted from eLearners.com*

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

Grand Valley uses Blackboard software for online courses. To access Blackboard, you will need your username and password. This is typically sent to you after your application is accepted. If you have difficulty accessing the Blackboard site, you can go to the help website at [gvsu.edu/elearn/help](https://gvsu.edu/elearn/help). You can also contact the Computing and Technology Support Help Desk at (616) 331-2101 or [helpdesk@gvsu.edu](mailto:helpdesk@gvsu.edu) for assistance.

## 2. Set aside some physical space for class:

Set aside some space in your home to keep your course materials. It is important to have some organization, even if it is just two folders — a physical one for important papers and a folder on your computer for documents. If you are planning to use multiple computers, such as one at home and one at work, invest in a flash drive, Cloud storage, or similar device so that your documents are portable.

**Keep in mind:** Internet connection can be unpredictable depending on weather or location. Be sure to keep an offline or physical copy of the syllabus, textbooks, and assignments for classes so you can still access important information.

For more helpful hints, read the information on *How to Set Up a Home Office for Online Learning* that is included in this document.

## 3. Know the school landscape:

Just as if you were walking around a new campus, you will need to "walk" around Blackboard and the Grand Valley website to learn where things are located. To access Blackboard, go to [gvsu.edu](https://gvsu.edu) and click on the "Bb" icon on the top right of the page. Log into Blackboard with your assigned username and password as soon as possible. Click on different links to see what is available to orient yourself to Grand Valley's website and the Blackboard learning site.

## 4. Visit the bookstore:

Go to the GVSU Laker Bookstore at <https://lakerstore.gvsu.edu/home> to order your books for your course(s). Sometimes it takes 7-10 days to ship the book(s), so order in advance if possible. Occasionally, the bookstore does not order enough copies of the materials required for each course. You can also use the book's unique ISBN code to order from an outside site, such as Amazon.com, Half.com, or Textbooks.com.

You can also reach out to your professor and ask which textbooks are used when in the course. This can help you determine which textbooks are needed earlier in the semester and allows you to shop smarter.

## 5. Find the important offices and contact information:

Locate the web pages for any offices you might need, such as the academic unit or department teaching your course, the [course catalog](#), and [Blackboard support pages](#). Knowing where these things are will save you time and effort when you are trying to get information in a hurry. Here are some common offices at Grand Valley:

[The Office of Financial Aid](#)

[The Graduate School](#)

[IT Help Desk](#)

[University Libraries](#)

[Office of the Registrar](#)

## 6. Find out where your class is:

Once you log in to Blackboard, you will see several boxes with headings. The box titled **My Courses** will appear in the top left corner. In this box, you will see **Courses in which you are enrolled**, and the number and title of your course should be listed. To access course information, click on the course number.

If your course is not listed, contact the Office of the Registrar to verify your enrollment and then the [Teaching with Technology Support](#) team to have the class added to your Blackboard account.

## 7. Learn the layout of the classroom:

Check out the course and familiarize yourself with the online space and student portal. Think of the space as a classroom. Click on all the links, check out the discussion board, the assignments page, and anything else you can access, just as if you were checking out the physical space of a classroom. Your instructor may have already posted materials to Blackboard for review.

It is to your advantage to learn how to navigate the course before you begin class. 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 under **Course Information** or **Course Documents** and read it carefully. 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.

Identify the dates when key projects or papers are due and compare those dates with your personal or work calendar to check for conflicts. Knowing what to expect will help keep you focused and not overwhelmed.

## **9. Post your introduction and find a friend:**

Many online courses start by having the students write an introduction and post it on the discussion board. It takes time to get acquainted, so take advantage of it. Find someone in the class you find interesting and send them an email, or engage the group in a discussion to make connections and build camaraderie.

Having friends 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 online learning experience can be a little intimidating for anyone, but once you get the hang of it, you will do fine. Remember to ask questions, enjoy the experience, and most of all, remember to relax and breathe!

# How to Set Up a Home Office for Online Learning

*Adapted from eLearning.com*

It's not always easy to have a space for yourself, especially if you have a shared living space. Here are some guidelines to assist you in deciding how to design and set up a home office area just for online learning.

## **1. Find some space:**

If possible, try to dedicate a whole room to your new library/home office. Otherwise, it may be easier just to create a dual-purpose room like a guest room and home office or to set up a home office area within 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, you send a clear message: "When I am in here, it is because I am studying or in class."

(If you don't have a space in your home that you can convert into your dedicated office space, you can utilize a public library near you or come onto campus if you live nearby and use an empty classroom or library study room to attend class.)

## **2. Pick a quiet location:**

Road traffic is noisy, so try to pick a room that does not have a window facing the 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 choose 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 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 furnishings 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
- Computer with an Internet connection
- Printer, scanner, and/or fax machine
- 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

**Caution!** 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.

#### **5. Prevent distractions:**

Distractions can be plentiful. A message board on the door or outside of your home office will help with communication. Signs like "Studying until 7:30" or "Preparing for the exam at 8" will tell others what to expect and prevent 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. You may want helpful items such as a dictionary or thesaurus, pens, pencils, notepad paper, printer paper, highlighters, stapler, or sticky notes.

#### **7. Coping with noise:**

The perfect room 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 can lead to coffee-stained papers, damaged textbooks, and misplaced notes. Give everything a designated area on your desk and shelves. Use an old coffee mug to hold your pens, pencils, and highlighters. Use bookends to keep your books stacked on your desk.

You must keep your notes up-to-date. Have a filing system so that you can file away new papers, graded assignments, and exams. This will prevent loose papers and keep your desk tidy.

If you enjoy a cup of coffee or tea with your daily reading assignments, be sure to take the empty mug back to the kitchen when you are done. Remove all dirty dishes after using them so that they don't pile up and consume precious space on your desk. Another consequence of leaving old dishes around? They might begin to attract bugs and other unwanted critters, as well as getting smelly or moldy!

By taking a few minutes every day to keep your work area 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:**

Avoid the temptation to use 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 others in your home 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-canceling or noise-reduction headphones or earplugs.



# How to Avoid Feeling Isolated in Your Online Course

*Adapted from eLearners.com*

In a traditional classroom, you meet your fellow students and faculty and create a real community, even if 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.

But can you get that feeling as an online student? Here are some tips to avoid feeling isolated in your online course (and maximize your online experience):

## **1. Share a little personal information:**

It can be about your family (partners, spouses, children, pets) and your life (favorite hobbies, professional interests, top five movies, etc.) in your introduction post. You can even use a profile picture on yourself on Blackboard so your classmates can put a face to a name! Blackboard resides behind a firewall, so only your classmates, your professor, and some of the university administrators have access to this information. Grand Valley values student privacy and is required by law not to share personal information, so it is 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. Anyone can get an online community started!

**Keep this in mind:** all of your classmates are receiving this same advice! Sometimes it just takes one person to take the first step to create a community with your fellow students.

## **3. Find a study partner:**

At the beginning of class, find someone you would like to get to know better and start an email conversation with them. It is good to have a study partner in the class, and it will help reduce your isolation. Keep your initial email short and let the receiver know in the Subject line that you are from the same class. If one person does not respond, find another person to email.

## **4. Keep active in your class:**

Visit your course regularly, just like you were going to class. Keep up on the discussion postings, turning in your papers on time, and do the readings. It will make you feel more connected if you are in the mindset of a regular student.

Make sure to respond to emails as you would like others to respond to yours.

## **5. Talk to others 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, but it will also help you absorb the information and make your online work more exciting.

## **6. Use the course chat room or instant messaging:**

Get to know your fellow students in the class chat room or through an instant messaging program. Sites like Discord and GroupMe can be used to create chat rooms for you and your fellow classmates for free and can be accessed on desktop, laptop, and mobile devices. Ask your study partner 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. If you have a team assignment, try using Blackboard IM for one of your meetings. 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 your phone, instant messaging, or the class chat room for your team time. Save the discussion board and emailing for exchanging files and polishing your group project. Create a shared Google Drive or Folder so everyone can collaborate on project elements together. You will get to know your fellow classmates and get a better grade if everyone gets to know each other, even just a little bit.

Online courses call instant messaging, chat rooms, and phone conversations synchronous, meaning at the same time, and call discussion postings and emails asynchronous, meaning not at the same time.

## **8. Look for opportunities to meet other online students:**

They do not 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 such as coffee shops are good starting points for locating students. You can also connect online with the [GVSU Graduate Student Association](#) to become involved outside of the classroom.

## **9. Establish a relationship with your professor:**

If you are truly interested in the subject you are taking, email your professor some well-thought-out questions about the subject. Most professors will answer and enjoy sharing their expertise, so don't be shy! 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.

## Tips for Taking Online Courses

Taking courses online can be a little like taking courses in a foreign country. Many of us are still learning the norms and expectations of the online environment. Even though the technology is wonderful and exciting, we would never say that this environment is the right learning environment for every student. It works well for some students most of the time. It provides exciting opportunities for people who are constrained by time, place, or other factors.

Online courses can work for any student, just as a physical, onsite classroom with face-to-face instruction can work for any student -- but we all know the quality of the "fit" with a particular instructor or a particular class environment varies. Taking an online class requires just as much time and effort as a class on campus -- and there are some new twists for most of us.

### Reading is Key

Remember that you won't have all those non-verbal cues that you get in the physical classroom, and neither will your instructor. Also, your instructor's role will be much less that of the distributor of information and much more that of a guide or resource for you in exploring an area of knowledge. Almost all your information will come in the form of words. Words on the screen help the instructor "see" you much more clearly. The teaching style used in online courses may be different from the traditional college model. Taking a class online means you won't be sitting quietly in the classroom; participation is even more essential.

### Communication is Key

As always, effective communication is critical to success. It's even more important in the online environment because your instructor can't see your frown or hear the question in your voice. Here, you'll be responsible for initiating more contact, for being persistent and vocal when you don't understand something. Your instructor wants to help -- please write your question and send it along, express your confusion, your concern, and be direct! You will save a lot of time, and both you and your instructor will know better what you intend. Be sure and ask about anything and everything that has to do with course content, course procedure, and evaluation.

### More Rules of the Road

#### **1. Participate:**

In the online environment, it's not enough to show up! The class needs to hear your voice (and see your face if meeting over a video chat) to feel your presence and your comments to add to the information, the shared learning, and the sense of community in each class.

#### **2. Be persistent:**

Remember that we're all working in this environment. If you run into any difficulties, don't wait! Send a note immediately to the instructor of the course listed on the syllabus. Most problems are easily solved, but we have to hear from you before we can help.

#### **3. Share tips and questions:**

Taking online courses can be a challenging frontier. There are no dumb questions, and even if you think your solution is obvious, please share it! Someone in the class will appreciate it.

**4. Think before you push the Send button:**

Did you say just what you meant? How will the person on the other end read the words? While you can't anticipate all reactions, do read over what you've written before you send it.

**5. Be patient:**

As much as your instructor will try to be prompt in answering questions, please do not expect instantaneous responses to your queries. Learn how to set breaks while you study so that you can return exactly to the point when your question is answered. Be patient with yourself as well; give the material a chance to soak in.

**6. Plagiarism, cheating, and other violations:**

Violations of ethical student behavior are serious actions in a learning community. You should expect to be treated accordingly. Specific policies regarding such actions are spelled out in the Student Code, available at [gvsu.edu/studentcode/](http://gvsu.edu/studentcode/).

## Time Management for Online Education

**1. Find Out What Is Expected of You from Each Professor/Course:**

The syllabus, which acts as a contract for the course, is a document provided at the start of a class that offers an overview of the course. Read the syllabus for each class thoroughly, familiarizing yourself with the expectations for each course to optimize your time management.

**2. Write Down Due Dates:**

Write down the key due dates from the syllabus in one or more additional places that you will refer to regularly. Check those dates before you agree to any work, social, or personal commitments that could conflict with your school demands.

**3. Create Mini-Deadlines:**

Create your own "mini" due dates that will help you to better monitor your own progress. For example, if you have a term paper due by the 3rd week of class:

By what date will you pick your term paper topic?

How about having a date for finishing up the research for your paper?

The first draft?

**4. Self-pacing Is Key to Online Learning:**

Studying for too long at one time can wear you down, but not studying long enough can leave you ill-prepared. Take efficiency breaks every twenty minutes or so. It will replenish you so you can read, write, or study more.

**5. Back Everything Up:**

Make sure you have backed up your work in multiple ways. Back up your computer and course work to an external hard drive, USB stick, or a second computer. Printing out a hard copy may

seem old-fashioned, but if you lose your electronic version of your work, with a hard copy, you can always make another copy.

## Resources for Online Learning

Here is a list of websites for online learning for additional information and support:

[GVSU Libraries Distance and Hybrid Learning Guide](#)

[GVSU Online Knowledge Market](#)

[GVSU Skills for Online Learning](#)

[The Graduate School's Guides for Graduate Students](#)

[eCampus.com: New & Used Textbooks and College Apparel](#)

[7 Success Strategies for Distance Learners \(WorldWideLearn\)](#)

[7 More Tips for Distance Learning \(U.S. News & World Report\)](#)

[Tips for Studying Online \(GradSource.com\)](#)

[The Best-Kept Secrets To Succeed At Distance Learning \(eLearning Industry\)](#)