

Communication Skills for Online Learning Transcript

Good communication skills are essential in your online course. There are many different ways you'll communicate with your instructor and other students in your class, so we've created this module to introduce you to common terms you'll need to know and familiarize you with some concepts that we hope will lead you to success in your class.

Our job in this module is to teach you: the vocabulary that may be used to describe communication in your online class; how communication is different for you as a student when you're learning online, some of the advantages and disadvantages of academic online communication; and how to become an effective communicator in your online course. Let's begin with a few definitions. First let's talk about the two types of communication that can be used in an online class. Asynchronous communication is when you, your classmates, and your instructor participate in online discussions at different times, rather than in real time. So if you send your instructor a question via email, participate in an online discussion forum, or post to a blog for your class, you are communicating asynchronously.

Synchronous communication happens in real time, like having a class discussion in a traditional setting or talking to a teacher after class. But you can communicate synchronously in an online environment too, through the use of tools like: online chat; internet voice or video calling systems like Skype or Google Hang-outs; or through the use of web-based video conferencing software like WebEx, Zoom, or Collaborate. The discussion board, also known as a discussion forum or message board, is one of the most popular features in a Course Management System, and it's one place where your asynchronous classroom discussions can occur.

Your instructor may post the first message (or prompt) and ask students to reply to their initial post, or they may choose to allow students to post a topic (or thread) and engage the class in the online conversation that way. Both methods are equally effective, and discussions in your online courses are likely to vary, just like your discussions in a traditional class can differ depending on your instructor and their personal teaching style.

Think of a blog as a website journal or diary. Blogs are usually run by an individual or a small group. Entries are made periodically and typically displayed in reverse chronological order so the most recent post will appear first. Most blogs are set up to allow readers to post comments below each entry, and it is often just as informative to read the comments and criticisms of fellow readers as it is to read the initial blog post. Some instructors may require you to post or review blogs during your online course, and they can be a useful source of information.

Keep in mind, though, that blogs are typically personal communication platforms, so be sure to double-check facts or information you might find on a blog with a verified source before using it in your research. Now that we've talked a little bit about different kinds of asynchronous communication, let's talk about some forms of synchronous communication. Many course management systems have a text-based chat feature that will allow you to exchange messages with others who are online at the same time as you. Sometimes instructors will use the chat feature as a way to hold office hours or a study session. Because chat happens in real time, there is a sense of immediate gratification. You don't have to wait several hours (or more) for a response like you might have to with email.

Skype is a free software application that will enable you to make voice and video phone calls over the Internet. Once you download, register, and install the software for Skype, you'll probably want to plug in a headset or a microphone and speakers so that you can hear others and they can hear you more clearly. If you are using video, you'll need a web cam, but many newer computers and laptops now include this as part of their standard equipment. Video Conferencing software applications like Zoom, Collaborate, or WebEx are designed to support larger groups than Skype. They can provide a virtual experience that closely replicates an on-campus classroom.

Many videoconferencing applications include useful features like: the ability to share desktops; the ability to share files; online chat windows; virtual white boards; and break-out rooms for small group work. So your computer can truly become a window into a live classroom where students and instructors can interact and collaborate at the same time. Finally, "netiquette", which is the correct or acceptable way to communicate online. It's the code of online etiquette you should abide by, especially when in an academic or professional setting. This goes for both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Netiquette includes respectful behavior, appropriate language, and an acknowledgement of other people's privacy interests. Remember, your classroom discussions should be much more formal than the type of discussions you may have with your friends on Facebook or Twitter. Now that we've covered some of the basic terminology, let's start digging a little deeper into these topics. Here are some typical questions that students have about communicating online.

(Student 1) Ok, so you've told us about the differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication. But what does this mean for me? (Narrator) Online class communication often takes place asynchronously rather than in real time, giving you a chance to research, write, and edit your answers, instead of being put "on the spot" during class. Think of this as an opportunity for you to really reflect and compose your thoughts carefully before you make a response. Synchronous sessions are similar to what you experience in your traditional classes. Discussions can often be more lively this way, because interactions are immediate since everyone is in the virtual room at the same time. They can also help an online class bond more quickly, if used early in the semester.

(Student 2) Will my online communications be permanent? (Narrator) Yes--when you communicate asynchronously online, you create a permanent record of your words. All of your electronic communication will be dated, and because of this it can be easily organized, stored and reviewed (usually for grading purposes) at a later date. Because your words are enduring, it is a good idea to compose your electronic communications carefully before posting.

(Student 3) I generally feel more comfortable talking online than in person. Is online communication easier than face-to-face communication in a classroom, too? (Narrator) It can be. When you communicate through email, private messages, a discussion board, or a blog, you're somewhat anonymous. Your instructor and classmates may not know your age, gender, race, ethnicity, or other physical characteristics. Some students find that this environment gives them extra confidence if they are normally shy or tongue-tied in front of instructors or other students.

(Student 4) This isn't really a question, but more of a concern. I'm worried that there will be more potential for misunderstanding when I'm communicating online than when I'm communicating face-to-face. (Narrator) This is a valid concern. Because the teacher and your classmates cannot see your body language or hear your voice, written words can sometimes be misinterpreted. Review your written communications in an online course carefully before posting and try to remove any language that could be interpreted as offensive or inappropriate.

(Student 5) Can I make friends in an online course? (Narrator) Absolutely! If you're normally reserved in front of other people, an online environment can make it feel like you can express your ideas more freely.

Discussion boards and blogs often create a real sense of community as you respond to your instructor's and other students' posts, and they respond to yours. In an online course everyone has a chance (and is expected) to speak.

(Student 6) I get that email and discussion boards will be important, but will any of my online course communication be synchronous? I thought that I would be able to do all of my online work on my own schedule. (Narrator) It depends on the course, but it is likely! Many online instructors use online chat, Skype, and videoconferencing tools like Zoom, Collaborate, or WebEx. It will also provide a nice contrast to the asynchronous communication you'll be doing in your course, because it presents an opportunity to be more interactive. You'll want to check your syllabus early on to see if your instructor has scheduled any synchronous sessions for your online course, and make note of those dates and times. As we already pointed out, these will take place in real time, and you don't want to miss class!

(Student 7) Can you give me some tips for writing effectively in an online educational environment? I don't want to get started on the wrong foot. (Narrator) If you can write well, you'll already have an advantage in an online course: effective writing is essential to your success. But we do have some more suggestions that you should find helpful: Always proof your writing for spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors. Keep your posts concise. Avoid slang and offensive language. Look for opportunities to collaborate with other students in the course. If you find you've written a negative comment, try reframing it in a way that is more conducive for creating discussion. It's ok to disagree with someone, but being disagreeable or making personal attacks is not.

(Student 8) Ok, so how do I go about writing a respectful and respectable discussion post? (Narrator) First, make sure that you read your instructor's directions and follow them carefully. This is the most basic way of showing respect for your instructor and the others in the classroom. Second, take your time before you respond when your online instructor posts topical questions to a discussion board, and he or she is requesting your informed response.

In this last section we'll review a term we introduced earlier in the module, "netiquette", and extend this to include email etiquette, a particularly important part of taking almost any class today, whether it's online or face-to-face. Just as a reminder, "netiquette" is the correct or acceptable code of conduct for communicating online. Here's your challenge: Based on the tips we've talked about today, help Brittany compose an email to her history professor asking when the midterm will take place. At each step you'll be presented with two choices of sentences or phrases. Simply select the choice you think is best. When addressing your teacher, include a title such as "Professor" or "Instructor," unless they ask you to address them otherwise. If you're unsure of your instructor's title, you can simply ask your teacher in a preliminary email. When addressing your teacher, include a title such as "Professor" or "Instructor," unless they ask you to address them otherwise. If you're unsure of your instructor's title, you can simply ask your teacher in a preliminary email. Even though it might be a convenient shortcut for texting or Instant Messaging with your friends, don't write email or a private message to your instructor or others in "text speak." Punctuate your message correctly, check your spelling carefully, and begin the first word of each sentence with a capital letter. Showcase your brilliance! Even though it might be a convenient shortcut for texting or Instant Messaging with your friends, don't write email or a private message to your instructor or others in "text speak." Punctuate your message correctly, check your spelling carefully, and begin the first word of each sentence with a capital letter. Showcase your brilliance! Don't use all capital letters for certain words or phrases in emails or private messages.

Readers often interpret emails written in all caps as if the writer is yelling at them. Don't use all capital letters for certain words or phrases in emails or private messages. Readers often interpret emails written in all caps as if the writer is yelling at them. Great job, and thanks for getting Brittany off on the right track with her instructor!

Before you leave we want to leave you with one final, feline acronym that will help you remember three important aspects of email etiquette: RAR! Before you leave we want to leave you with one final, feline acronym that will help you remember three important aspects of email etiquette: RAR! Before you leave we want to leave you with one final, feline acronym that will help you remember three important aspects of email etiquette: RAR! Before you leave we want to leave you with one final, feline acronym that will help you remember three important aspects of email etiquette: RAR! R: Respond. Respond to email and private messages in a timely manner; don't let more than two days elapse before replying to your instructor or another student. A: Attach. If you've included an attachment with your email, mention it in the body of the email. Then double-check that you actually included the attachment before you hit "send." R: Re-read. This goes for emails, as well as any other written text you submit in your course.

One of the biggest advantages of taking an online class is that you can really take your time to think about and formulate your responses before you deliver them. You're now ready to take on any online communication challenges you may encounter in your course.

Congratulations on finishing the Online Communication Skills module, and don't forget to RAR!