

## Online Learning Survival Guide

### Introduction

Welcome to the “Online Learning Survival Guide: How to survive and *thrive* in your online courses at Indian Hills Community College.”

In this guide, we’ll introduce you to online learning. We’ll give you a sense for what’s expected of you as an online student, and share some proven strategies that’ll help you succeed in your online courses, as well as some myths about online learning and common mistakes to avoid.

### Be Aware of Your Environment

The first step in any new situation is understanding your surroundings. Just as you’d take time to become familiar with the campus in a face-to-face setting, you should also take time to get to know your online learning environment.

### What Is Online Learning?

Online Learning courses cover the same content as their on-campus counterparts, but are taken over the Internet rather than in a face-to-face classroom. Instructors and students communicate using online technologies. Students post to discussion forums, submit assignments through online drop boxes, access audio and video recordings, take quizzes, work together on group projects, and participate in live online class sessions, all from their homes, using our online learning management system, which we call MyHills. You can find out more about the technical aspects of how this works in the Online Learning area of the Indian Hills website and by working through the Computer Tutorials available there.

Online courses generally do not require students to come to campus. However, Indian Hills also offers some courses in a *hybrid* format, which means they’re a mixture of online work and face-to-face lab, clinical, or class sessions. Our focus, in this guide, is on purely online courses.

### Myth #1: Online Courses Are Easier Than On-Campus Courses

Actually, online courses are **not** easier, they’re harder.

Some students take online courses thinking they’re an easier alternative to face-to-face courses and soon are shocked by the fact that they’re actually more *difficult* in many ways.

Of course, having to learn to use new technology in order to access course material and interact with instructors and students makes taking *online* courses more *work* than face-to-face courses. But there’s more to it than that.

Online courses generally require more *self-discipline* than on-campus courses. In an on-campus course, students are expected to attend classes on specific days and times during the week. This keeps them moving forward through the course material. Having to physically sit in front of the instructor and fellow students adds motivation for completing assignments and being able to contribute to class discussions.

However, in an online course, students have to set aside time to work through their course material on their own. Without strong time management skills and the ability to discipline yourself, it's easy to fall behind. Also, in face-to-face courses, instructors may repeat the material students were assigned to read as homework. So, some students may develop a habit of not reading the material for themselves. In an online course, that's not the case. If you don't complete your assigned readings and other learning activities, then you'll quickly begin to see the results in your low grades.

### ***Myth #2: Online Courses Are Self-Paced***

While some online courses are self-paced, *most* follow a specific schedule with set due dates for assignments throughout the course. Some courses also include group projects, requiring you to work together with other members of your team to finish assignments. It's critical that you become familiar with the Course Schedule before the course begins and plan your study schedule to ensure you have time to keep up with readings and assignments.

### ***Netiquette (Internet Etiquette)***

Although online courses use the Internet for interaction, they're not the same as the informal kinds of communication you may be used to when using the Internet – like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, texting, and so on. This is a professional learning environment. When sending emails and other communication to your instructors and fellow students, be respectful and courteous. This reflects well on you and the college and will also help prepare you to interact professionally in the workplace.

Netiquette, short for Internet Etiquette, refers to a set of accepted practices created over the years to make the Internet more pleasant for everyone. It's basically a set of rules for behaving properly online. Here are a few tips to help you, when you're interacting in your online courses:

- The most important rule is to remember that we're human beings. Something about the Internet makes it easy to forget you're interacting with real people who have feelings, just like you, not just text on a computer screen. A good rule of thumb is that if you wouldn't say it to the person's face, then don't say it online either. Just remember to treat others as you would have them treat you.
- Begin your emails with a greeting and the name of the person to whom you're writing, rather than just jumping right into what you have to say. It's more courteous.
- End your emails with your first and last name to make it easier for the recipient to identify you.
- Include the course number in the subject line of your emails. Professors generally teach several courses at a time with numerous students. Making it easy for them to identify you will earn you a faster response and the gratitude of your instructors.
- In emails, discussion forums, and online chat sessions, avoid texting abbreviations, such as LOL, BRB, and the like, as not everyone may be familiar with them. These may be appropriate among friends in an informal environment, but not in online college courses.

- Resist the temptation to use ALL CAPS, multicolored text, and large images in your emails, discussion forums, and papers. Using all capital letters is commonly interpreted as yelling online. Multicolored text can be distracting and hard on the eyes. Large images make file sizes larger than they need to be, increasing the time it takes others to download and open them. Instead, keep the focus on the *content* of what you're trying to say.
- In online discussion forums, it's more about the quality and substance of what you say, than the quantity. So make sure your posts demonstrate that you understand the assigned material and contribute in a meaningful way to the discussion.
- Disagree, but be agreeable. In other words, you're encouraged to challenge ideas and think for yourself, but be courteous and respectful in the process. Again, remember, there's a real person on the other side of that email or discussion posting.
- When reading emails and posts from others, give them the benefit of the doubt. There's something about cold, lonely words on a computer screen that can make us assume the worst. They usually don't convey tone or emotion very well. So, assume the writer is wearing a friendly smile and has the best of intentions. That tends to go a long way when it comes to promoting effective communication.
- This is a learning environment, which means you can expect your professors to stretch your thinking, challenge your ideas, and correct your work. Don't take this personally. Remember that learning is why you're going to college in the first place. See this for what it is – your instructors caring about you and working with you to help you fulfill your potential.

### Get to Know Your Tools (or Tool Kit)

To survive in the wilderness, you need to get to know your tools. The same is true in online learning.

#### *Computer and Internet*

Your computer and Internet connection are your two most important tools. Make sure your computer meets the specs required to use our online learning technology and has the necessary software installed by downloading the **Online Computer Standards**, available on our website. We strongly encourage students to have a reliable, high-speed Internet connection in their homes, like cable or DSL. While a dial-up connection *can* work, you may get frustrated at the amount of time it takes to download files and move around online.

We also encourage students to have their own computers and Internet service, instead of relying on a friend, family member, local library, workplace, or college computer lab, because these may not be available when you need them to complete your assignments.

Some of our online courses require students to have a headset with a built-in microphone and a webcam in order to interact in our live online classrooms and to record audio and video messages and

to take tests. See the Online Computer Standards and your Course Syllabus for more information on what you'll need.

### ***Myth #3: "I Can Figure It Out As I Go"***

Please take the time to work through the **Computer Tutorials** that are part of this orientation. They include short video demonstrations that show you how to use the various tools in MyHills. You can also download PDF versions for easy reference when you're offline. Knowing how to use the technology is **required** in order to take online courses. If you and computers don't get along, then online learning may not be the best option for you. Professors won't excuse late assignments because a student doesn't know how to use the technology. So, make sure you know how it works and test it out *before* you need it in your courses.

### ***IT Help Desk***

If you're having trouble with the technology in a course, if you've watched the relevant computer tutorials, but you need a little more help, or if something isn't working as it should, we've got you covered. The Information Technology Help Desk is here to help you. Check out the IT Help Desk page on our website for details on their hours and how to contact them. You can find a link right on the Online Learning page or type [www.indianhills.edu/helpdesk](http://www.indianhills.edu/helpdesk).

### ***Myth #4: Online Courses Don't Use the Library***

Actually, online students are expected to use the library for research projects, just like on-campus students. As an online student, you need to become familiar with the many services offered by the Indian Hills Community College Library, as well as your nearest local public library. Through our college library, you have access to some outstanding online research databases that allow you to access scholarly journal articles and other information for your papers and projects. You can make use of the library's Online Card Catalog to find other resources, including electronic books and audio books. If you have questions or need help, you can call or email the library. We even offer an online course in Library and Internet Research that will improve your research skills even more. Check out the Library web page at [www.indianhills.edu/library](http://www.indianhills.edu/library) to get started.

### ***Know Yourself***

We need to know our environment and our tools, but perhaps the most important part of learning, whether you're in an online or an on-campus course, is knowing *yourself*.

### ***"Is Online Learning Right For Me?"***

Be sure to complete the exercise "Is Online Learning Right for Me?" that's part of this orientation. It'll ask you some important questions and provide useful feedback and information to help you determine whether online courses are a good fit for your educational needs. Online Learning isn't always the best option for everyone. Some students learn better in a face-to-face classroom. We want to help you figure this out *before* you spend the time and effort registering for an online course.

## Adult Learning

For some, the biggest transition they have to make in college has to do with understanding how to approach their learning. The expectations of *college*-level courses are different than those in most high schools, because adults and children learn differently.

If you take a look at this chart, you'll see that there are some significant contrasts between children and adults, when it comes to learning.

While children usually just need to know what to learn, adults also need to know *why* and how it applies to their lives.

Where children are dependent on their teachers, adults must be self-directed and responsible for their own learning.

Children are concerned with passing their courses or getting good grades. Adults seek education because of needs in their career- or life-contexts.

Child learning is focused on standard subjects. They have to learn math and English, for example. Adult learning is life, task, or problem-centered. I need to learn how to write well so that I can put together reports for an office manager or because I want to become a journalist, so I take a writing course. I'm looking for meaning and asking the big questions of life, so I take a course in philosophy. I want a career in healthcare, so I take a nursing course.

Children are *externally* motivated by parents, grades, and teachers, while adults are *internally* motivated by things like job satisfaction, self-esteem, or quality of life.

While children are passive, waiting for the teacher to tell them what to do or to give them information, adult learners are active, taking charge of their learning, getting help when needed, and doing what's necessary to learn what they need to achieve their goals.

While a child is focused on *knowing* or soaking up information, usually to pass tests, an adult learner is focused on *becoming* – becoming a professional; - becoming a nurse; - becoming a specialist in robotics. The knowledge serves a formational purpose.

In short, while children are largely dependent upon others to direct their studies, set goals, and motivate them due to their lack of life experience and basic knowledge base – Adult Learners are generally internally-motivated, seeking education to address needs in their life contexts, and bringing their own rich resources of experience to the learning environment.

In practice, this means that you'll need to take an active role in your own learning, rather than passively looking to others to simply give you information or push you to complete assignments on time. In *our* courses, you'll be expected to engage the course material critically and to think for yourselves – applying the principles you're learning and contributing to class discussions. This will be a major adjustment for many of you. And the difference is even more pronounced in online courses, where you aren't physically present with your instructors.

This is part of the Online Learning Survival Guide, because it's probably the most important factor in determining your level of success as an online student.

### **Take Ownership and Responsibility**

You're in college now. You're paying for access to the knowledge and experience of your professors. It's up to you to make the most of that time by owning and being responsible for your learning opportunities. You'll be glad you did!

#### ***Myth #5: Interaction isn't that important.***

One of the challenges of online learning is something called "psychological distance." Simply put, it refers to the sense of disconnect that students can feel from their instructors and fellow students, because of not being physically present with them.

The way to avoid psychological distance is to aggressively engage in your online courses. When discussion forums are assigned, jump in right away and start participating. Interact with your instructor and classmates. If you're assigned to a group and asked to schedule times to meet in your team's online chat room to work on your project together, then don't wait for someone else to get the ball rolling or tell you what to do. Instead, contact your teammates right away and start proposing times to meet. Get involved. Be active in your online courses. The connections you form with your professor and classmates make a HUGE difference in your learning as an online student. Usually, this interaction is also assessed in some way by your instructors and becomes part of your course grade. So it's worth the effort for that reason, too.

#### ***Read and follow instructions.***

Read all of the instructions and materials already provided by your instructors online *before you ask* for help. They have invested significant time developing these materials in order to make their expectations as clear as possible. If you're still confused or have questions, *after* you've carefully read the instructions, then feel free to ask for help. If you have difficulty reading and usually need face-to-face instructions, then an on-campus course may be a better option to help you achieve your goals.

#### ***Keep up with the schedule***

It's critical that you keep up with the course schedule. Often, assignments are not accepted after their due dates and interactive assignments, like discussion forums, can't be made up. Set aside several times during the week to work on your course. Along the way, ask yourself if your strategy is working and make any necessary adjustments. Avoid distractions when you're studying. The discipline and self-management you exercise in doing your course work is about more than just the subject you're studying. It's forming you as a person, strengthening the work habits that will help make you successful in whatever field you pursue in the future.

#### ***Myth #6: "I'm bothering my Professor"***

Your professors are here to help you. That's what we *do*. Most instructors love their subject matter. We've spent years studying it and/or years in the field practicing it. So, we'd better like it, right? Professors are more than happy to discuss their subjects with you. It's why we've gone into teaching. And we're eager to see you succeed in our courses. But it's up to you to let us know when you're having

trouble and want help. Instructors don't generally push it on you. Remember the differences between adult and child learners that we discussed earlier?

And you know, you don't have to wait until you're having trouble to contact us. Maybe you're excited about something you're learning and want to share that with your professor or find out more about it. Don't hesitate to connect and let us know.

### ***Get help when you need it.***

Instead of waiting for your instructors to check on you, take the initiative to get the help you need. If you wait and put off getting help, then it'll only get worse, as more material is added week by week. Don't wait until midterm to ask for help.

When you're asking for help. Ask good questions. "I don't understand anything in this course" or "I'm failing all the tests. What should I do?" doesn't give your instructors what they need to help you. If you ask general questions, you'll get general answers. Be specific. Tell the instructor exactly what you're not understanding. Use the phone. Show up for online office hours. Email your instructor with times when you're available and schedule a phone appointment. Sometimes using the phone is faster and easier than exchanging lengthy emails. And, let's face it, sometimes you just need to hear your instructor's voice to know that he or she on your side and wants to help.

Don't blame others for your struggles. That'll get you nowhere. Find out what you need to do to improve and do it. Contact your professors.

For example, maybe you have poor grammar and spelling skills when it comes to papers or discussion forum posts. Then, take one of our many online courses in writing and use the online tutoring services provided by the Academic Success Center. The help is available, if you take the initiative and ask for it.

## **Avoid Common Hazards**

### ***Procrastination***

Probably the most common hazard students encounter in their online courses is procrastination – putting things off or ignoring them until the last minute. We tend to procrastinate about things we either don't like doing or things that we're afraid of failing at. Have you ever noticed that no matter how busy you are, you can always make time for the things you love to do?

The thing about putting something off is that it never gets easier to do it. You only get more stressed out, as the due date gets closer. If we're afraid of failing at something and we put it off until we don't have time to do it well, then we only guarantee our failure. We may think that gives us an excuse, but it doesn't really. It just ensures we never discover whether we really could have done it well. We also waste time, money, and the opportunity we had to learn something new and get some great feedback on our work from a trained professional. Your professors don't expect you to be perfect. College is about learning. That assumes that you don't already know what we're teaching you.

So, how do you overcome procrastination? The next time you're afraid of failing at something, step back, and take a deep breath. Loosen up and remind yourself that it's about learning, not being perfect

the first time. It's about becoming a better *you*, not about getting all A's. And don't forget to ask for help, if you need it.

Maybe you're not afraid of failing – you just don't particularly like this kind of assignment. Then, imagine how good it will feel to have it done and behind you! You're going to have to do the work anyway at some point, so why let it stress you out for longer than it has to? Take control of the situation, set aside some time, and crank out that assignment. Then, you can spend time on the things you enjoy, without the stress of knowing you have this assignment left to do.

Try it a couple of times and you'll see what I mean. Procrastination makes things harder, not easier.

Need another reason to beat the procrastination habit? Last minute technical problems. It seems that when we wait until the last minute to do something, that's when our technology gives us the most trouble. Do things early to avoid last minute technical problems and give yourself time to get help from the IT Help Desk, if necessary.

### ***Myth #7: "I can skip the reading."***

OK, let's be honest. We've all been in classes where if you skip the assigned reading, you might be able to scrape by, especially if your instructor tends to rehash the same content in class. You might even be able to bluff your way through discussions. But even then, you're not really learning what you could be if you'd spent more time with the material.

In online learning, skipping the reading is a sure fire way to fail a course. Online courses aren't repetitive. If you skip the assigned readings or other online content, like audio and video lectures, discussion forums, or activities, then you won't get that material anywhere else. So, you'll fail exams and be unable to complete projects for which that information or those skills are needed.

One more thing: There's no hiding in an online course, because each student has to participate as part of his or her grade. In a face-to-face course, you might be able to hide in the back and never raise your hand, but not online. And when you post to the discussion forum or interact with others on a group project, it's going to be obvious to everyone whether you've completed and understood the assigned material or are just trying to wing it.

### ***"Out of Sight, Out of Mind?"***

Because you don't have to attend a face-to-face class every week, it can be easy to forget about your online courses. "Out of sight, out of mind," as they say. Avoid that trap by being proactive about your online courses. Make your own class schedule, where you set aside times each week to work on your course, just as if it had fixed class sessions. Then, keep to that schedule. Maybe you're a night owl and it's midnight. Or maybe you're a morning person and it's 5:00 a.m. Whatever works for you. Just remember that if you fall behind, it can be really difficult to catch up, because most assignments can't be made up after the fact, especially discussion forums and group work that require interaction with others.



### ***Plagiarism and Cheating***

When the pressure is on and the due date is just ahead, the temptation to cheat may be strong. It's not hard to search the Internet for something on your topic and then copy and paste the text into your paper. Taking the ideas of others and presenting them as your own is called plagiarism. Some students even try purchasing entire papers online and passing them off as their own. Both of these things are cheating and lying, pure and simple. Cheating on tests is just as wrong. And saying, "I didn't know that it was cheating," isn't an acceptable excuse.

The worst thing about cheating is that you're robbing yourself, since you won't develop the skills these assignments are intended to give you. But most students who do these things aren't worried about that at the time. So, keep in mind that it's not that hard for instructors to tell that you've copied material from somewhere else. We've been reading your work all term, after all, and know how you think and write. Your professors can do Internet searches, too. If you're caught cheating, you can not only fail the course, but be subject to more stringent discipline from the college. Don't jeopardize your academic career, your reputation, your integrity, and your future by cheating. It's just not worth it.

### ***Have a backup plan***

You've got your laptop and high-speed home Internet connection ready to go. But what will you do when it's the night before the big paper is due and your computer crashes? Or maybe you have an online quiz due tonight or your team is holding an online chat session to discuss the big project and your Internet service goes down?

Always have a backup plan. Remember that this only works if you think things through *before* the problem occurs. So, take some time to set up some alternatives that you can rely on in a pinch. Maybe you have a good friend who will agree to let you use her computer in an emergency. Perhaps there's a local library, café, or family member with Internet access where you can connect.

Also, be sure to back-up your *files*. No one likes it when they've been working on a paper for weeks and they lose all their work when their computer crashes or they accidentally delete the file. Get a couple of USB Flash Drives, and copy your files to them every time you make changes. All it takes is one unexpected computer virus or crash and you'll be glad you had your files backed up.

"My computer crashed" and "My Internet went down" are the online equivalents of "The dog ate my homework." They don't usually carry much weight with instructors. So, be prepared.

Another quick tip:

Don't you hate it when you've crafted the perfect answer to your professor's question and are ready to click the submit button to post your message to the discussion forum and there's an Internet glitch that keeps the post from going through and you lose all your hard work?

You can easily avoid this hazard and also keep an offline record of your post at the same time. Type your discussion forum postings into a document using a program like MS Word, run spell check, and save before posting to the actual discussion forum. You can easily copy and paste the text from your document into a discussion forum post. Just make sure it copies over cleanly and looks right in your actual post before you move on. This works best if you don't use formatting features like bullet points, different fonts, and the like, because these features can add strange looking characters to your posts when you copy the text over.

### ***Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing***

Congratulations! You've taken your first steps toward being a successful online student. Now, you have a better idea of what online learning is all about and the skills and strategies it takes to not only survive, but to thrive in your online courses. You'll be able to hit the ground running, take ownership of your learning, and avoid the common hazards that could have tripped you up in the pursuit of your educational goals.

Let us leave you with one more tip:

Stephen Covey writes, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." Learning can be hard work. It takes persistent effort and commitment, especially in a college environment. But it's worth the effort. Keeping the main thing the main thing, means remembering why you're taking online courses. You have goals and dreams. And your education is one of the ways you'll achieve them. Let that motivate you and keep you focused as you apply yourself to your assignments in each course.

Enjoy the journey!