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![The University of Manchester logo]

The University of Manchester Library

Essential Skills for Online Learning

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Introduction to this resource

Hello and welcome to Essential Skills for Online Learning from The University of Manchester Library.

The resource will help you to develop skills that will enable you to get the most out of being an online learner. The strategies introduced will help you to think critically about your approach to learning online. You will be introduced to strategies to help you across three areas:

- **Organise:** you will learn about the benefits of being organised in your approach to online learning

- **Communicate:** you will recognise the importance of your role and your audience's expectations when communicating your ideas effectively online

- **Collaborate:** you will understand the ways in which you can contribute to and are supported by your collaborative online learning community

As you are introduced to strategies to support you in each of the three areas it is important to take time to reflect upon what works for you. Reflecting on your approach will help you to develop your skills within a wider context. To make the most of your online learning experience it is useful to think about how the ideas you have learned relate to each other.

Online Learning: Not better, not worse - just different!

All learners face opportunities, considerations, and challenges. Your experience of online learning may differ from your experience of other learning environments; not better, not worse - just different!

It is important to reflect on your own situation, your goals, and your motivations as a learner.

Example: You are completing your degree part time around your job, so you have limited time for studying. You would like to become better organised in order to make the most of your study time.

Activity: Write down your goals

Consider how you will use what you learn in this resource to help you achieve them. You might want to put a list of goals and motivations somewhere you will see them every day, or take the time to explain them to a friend or family member.

Your goals will serve to motivate you throughout your course. Once you have clearly defined your goals you can return to them whenever your studies become more challenging, to motivate yourself.

Section 1: Organisation

Introduction

In this topic you will learn that organisational skills are essential for effective online learning.

As an online learner you have a lot of freedom to study whenever, wherever and however suits you. This opportunity comes with potential challenges such as scheduling study around your already busy life, and ensuring that you stay motivated throughout your course when you don't have regular face-to-face contact with other students and your tutors.

In this topic, you will be introduced to tips and techniques, which will help you at each of the following stages:

1. Getting prepared – what to think about before you start your course and plan a realistic timetable to fit in with your existing commitments.

2. Organising your study – how to learn effectively in short, sharp bursts by using spaced practice. Spaced practice is a study technique, which involves reviewing learned information at regular intervals in order to improve your memory and understanding of the material.

3. Maintaining your focus – how to recognise and factors which may distract you from your studies and employ effective strategies to help you overcome these challenges.

As you progress through this topic, take time to reflect and consider the techniques you will use to organise your time.

Getting prepared

Like many students, you may have chosen online learning because you have other commitments, such as work or family, so the time, which you set aside for study, may be different to a traditional learner. For example, you may study in the evenings or weekends, during your lunch break or while travelling or commuting! As an online learner you have the freedom to create your own schedule, unlike students on face-to-face courses who receive a set timetable.

There are a number of things you can do from the start of your course in order to get organised, plan your workload and manage your time:

- Spend some time at the beginning of your course familiarising yourself with what's expected of you. Read through the course handbook or syllabus to help you do this.

- Add key dates and deadlines to your calendar. Set yourself targets and reminders so you don't fall behind. If you feel yourself falling behind talk to your supervisor as soon as possible.

- Schedule in short spaces of time each week to log into your online course and complete shorter tasks such as checking emails, posting on discussion boards and replying to other students' comments.

- Find a space where you can focus on studying. Different environments suit different people. You may prefer to work from home in a quiet room, or perhaps you find it easier to focus away from home such as in a local library or a café.

- Plan a timetable that works for you that fits around your regular commitments.

Organising your study around your everyday life

There may be unpredictability to your schedule. Any consistency that you're able to create may help you to succeed in your online learning, research encourages identifying regular times for study (Roper, 2007).

Activity: plan your timetable (5-10 minutes)

In this activity, you will analyse all your current weekly commitments in order to identify the best times for you to study. The aim is to create an achievable timetable, which you can stick to.

Step 1

In timetable template on page 9, add in all of your current commitments, see page 10 for an example. Your commitments could include:

- Work
- Childcare
- Household tasks
- Commuting
- Exercise and hobbies

Blank timetable:

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
07:00							
08:00							
09:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
13:00							
14:00							
15:00							
16:00							
17:00							
18:00							
19:00							
20:00							
21:00							
22:00							
23:00							

Example timetable:

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
07:00	Get ready for work	Get ready for work	Get ready for work	Get ready for work	Get ready for work	Sleep	Sleep
08:00	Commute	Commute	Commute	Commute	Commute	Sleep	Sleep
09:00	Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	Breakfast	Breakfast
10:00						Study?	Shopping
11:00							Family/relaxation time
12:00	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch		
13:00	Work	Work	Work	Work	Work	Lunch	
14:00						Clean the house	
15:00							
16:00							
17:00	Commute	Commute	Commute	Commute	Commute		Sunday dinner
18:00	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner		
19:00	Exercise class	Study?	Study?	Pilates class	Socialising	Dinner/ socialising	Household tasks
20:00							Study?
21:00	Relaxation time			Relaxation time			
22:00	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep	Sleep			Sleep
23:00					Sleep	Sleep	

Step 2

On your timetable identify and schedule blocks of time for study. These do not have to be huge blocks of free time. You can study effectively in short, sharp bursts. We will look at this in more detail when we introduce the spaced practice technique next. How does your timetable look? Have you found a balance between work, study and leisure time? Are there any changes you need to make to your life in order to fit in your study?

Build in flexibility:

When planning your time it is important to build in scope to be flexible, as sometimes you may have to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. When making a schedule build in more time than you think you need. Be realistic about what you can achieve and schedule breaks to keep your motivation going. Then if something takes longer than expected, it will not disrupt your whole timetable.

Cramming vs spaced practice

Cramming usually involves studying for a long and intense period shortly before an exam or assignment. Cramming is not the best way to make the most of your learning.

Spaced practice is the opposite of cramming! It is an approach to learning which involves returning to learned material several times over a longer period, adding depth to your understanding during each study session. The spaced practice technique allows you to move learned information from your short-term memory to your long-term memory.

Previously you have identified the variety of different demands on your time as an online learner. The variety of commitments, which online learners have, means that many only have shorter blocks of time in which to study. Therefore, the spaced practice technique is an approach, which can be particularly useful and relevant to online learners, allowing them to build on their learning gradually in shorter study sessions.

You will be introduced to spaced practice using strategies and techniques, which are also available from the Learning Scientists. To find out more, visit their blog.

By spacing your learning, you spread your study out across a much longer period. For example, six hours spread out over three weeks usually results in more effective learning than the same six hours right before an exam.

It is important to remember that each study session should include reviewing information from previous study sessions, online seminars, and group activities. By organising your study into sections, your study time will produce more sustained learning.

How to space your learning

Plan early

Plan your study time early; little and often is best.

Think back to the previous section about getting prepared for your studies. Create a timetable and identify periods of study times around your other commitments.

Review your learning

Review the information from each study session, but not immediately after. Take a break away from your study time and review your notes later.

Review older information

When reviewing information from a recent session, try to revisit important older information to keep it fresh. You may forget some of this older information from day to day, but in doing so your brain is forced to retrieve information, leading to longer lasting learning.

Structure your study

Simply rereading your notes is a passive strategy and you are unlikely to retain information in the long term. Instead, try to adopt other practical learning strategies.

For example, you could create flashcards to include the most important pieces of information or use techniques such as **elaboration** or **interleaving**. You could apply the **retrieval practice** (also known as the **testing effect**)* to your study by creating tests to complete from content from previous study sessions. Research has consistently shown that frequently testing yourself improves the retention and recall of information.

Note: these specialist terms are explained in the glossary.

Activity: Incorporating spaced practice

Think back to the "Plan your timetable" activity, which you completed earlier. Now consider the following questions;

1. How might you incorporate spaced practice into your schedule?

2. What activities might you use each time you review information from previous study sessions? How will you know whether the techniques are working, and whether you are learning well?

Follow up actions:

Once you have a clearer idea about the content and schedule of your online course, refer back to the timetable you made earlier. Use this as a basis to start planning your spaced practice and learning activities to help review content. If you decide to use different activities at each stage of the review process use symbols to represent the type of activity you will use within each block of study time.

Maintaining your focus: What is procrastination?

Procrastination refers to the process of delaying work on an important task or assignment, usually by engaging in less important tasks as a distraction or avoiding work altogether. Procrastination often occurs when an individual feels overwhelmed by everything they have to do.

Earlier in the resource, you considered how your timetable as an online learner might be different to that of students studying on a university campus. You have the flexibility to design your own timetable; however, you need to make sure it allows you to fit your studies around other commitments. When dealing with competing demands on your time you will want to make the best use of each study session you have. Therefore, in order to avoid procrastination and stay focussed it is important to develop strategies to help you keep motivated.

In this section of the resource you will be introduced to practical tips, tools and strategies to help you maintain your focus.

Step one:

Understanding of the psychology and causes of procrastination will help you anticipate situations where you might be more likely to procrastinate. The reasons why you are tempted to delay starting on a piece of work might vary slightly from those of other people; however, procrastinating behaviour always follows a similar pattern or cycle.

The list below demonstrates the pattern of thoughts and behaviour, which can lead to procrastination and continue the cycle once it has started. Read about each stage of the cycle and consider how they link together.

1. Task

All procrastination starts here. I have a task, challenge, or goal to achieve.

2. Unhelpful rules and assumptions

We often start with unhelpful mental rules or assumptions that get in our way. Some of the most common are:

- I need to be in charge.
- Life's too short.

- I'm too tired.
- I can't do it.
- If I don't try, I can't fail.
- It must be perfect.

3. Perceived discomfort

My mental rules make me feel anxious and uncomfortable, so I look for escape.

4. Excuses

In looking to escape the discomfort, I generate excuses.

- I don't have everything I need.
- I don't have enough time to do it now.
- I'm not motivated enough now.
- There's plenty of time to do it later.
- It's too sunny to be working inside all day.
- I've got to ring my parents/clean the house/eat some toast first.

5. Procrastination activities

Engage in any activity other than the task at hand. These procrastination activities are more pleasurable but considerably less important than my original task.

6. Short-term reward

In doing more pleasurable activities than my original task, I get a short term reward in enjoying the activity I'm doing, and in avoiding the potential discomfort that would have resulted from my unhelpful rules and assumptions.

7. Long-term negative consequences

My urge to procrastinate is intensified. I now consider my original task to be even more unpleasant than before, my unhelpful rules and assumptions are reinforced, and the perceived discomfort is intensified.

I continue to procrastinate. My work piles up and I feel stressed. The procrastination cycle continues.

Do you want to learn more about the causes of procrastination?

THE PROCRASTINATION CYCLE

1. Task
2. Unhelpful rule & assumptions
3. Perceived discomfort
4. Excuses
5. Procrastination activities
6. Short term reward
7. Long term negative consequence
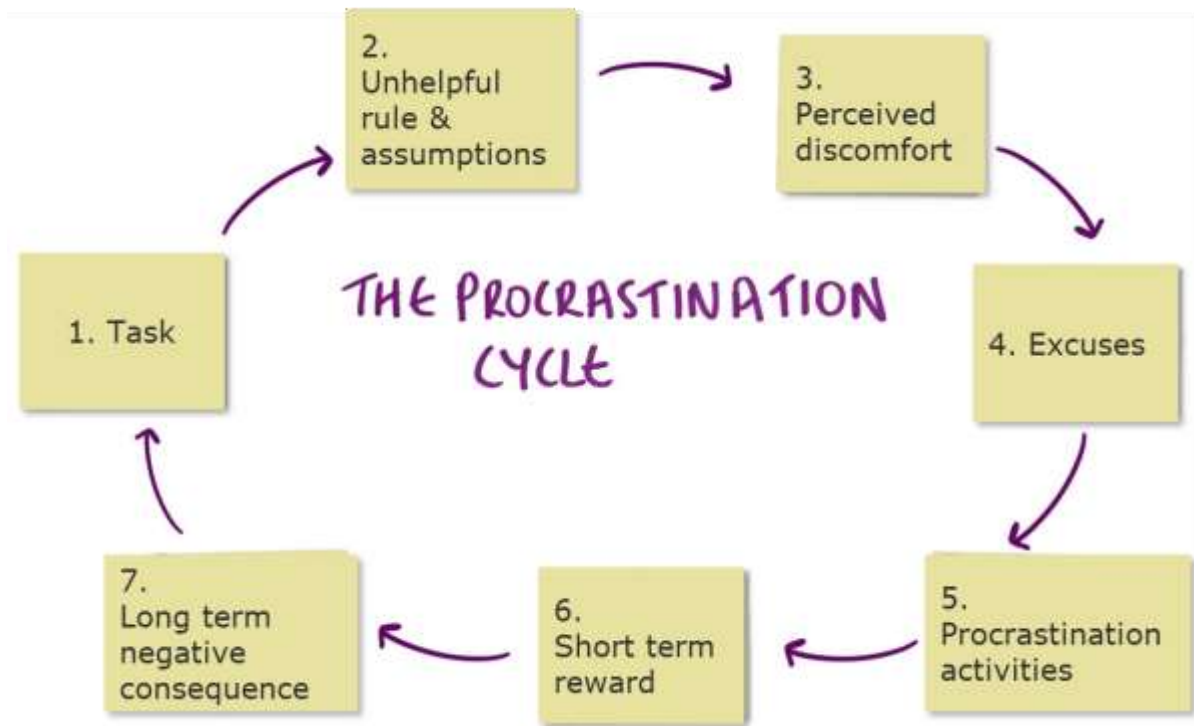
The diagram above is an extract from the My Learning Essentials online resource: Now or never? Understanding the procrastination cycle, (downloadable version). The resource was developed in partnership with colleagues at the University of Manchester Counselling Service. See the full resource for further information.

Contrary to popular belief procrastination is generally not the symptom of laziness, but the result of distorted thoughts and assumptions we all have about ourselves and our work. Once these negative thoughts start to drive the procrastination cycle it can be very difficult to stop. As an online learner, you will be responsible for motivating yourself to complete work to deadlines. You won't have a set schedule other than the schedule you make for yourself. Recognise your own unhelpful assumptions/attitudes/excuses as they arise and try to challenge them.

Suggested follow-up actions:

Question

The next time you feel tempted to procrastinate (whether it is related to your course or not) reflect on the reasons why. Are they based on evidence? Would you think this about anyone else on your course?

Ask others

Speak to other students on your course to see how they are finding the work (you will often find they are worried about the same things).

Create

A diagram of your own procrastination cycle.

Review

Any actions you have taken. What has worked/what hasn't? Continue to try out new things and develop your strategy.

Step two:

Try to anticipate the things, which could potentially distract you during one of your planned study sessions. Once you have done this you can then start to develop a plan to either prevent these distractions from taking place or deal with them when they do.

Activity – WOOP

You can use the WOOP technique to help you set goals and plan effectively for the future. WOOP stands for:

Wish

Outcome

Obstacle

Plan

When taking on a new task or working towards a goal it is important to make sure you are prepared and have a balanced view of what this will involve. This means you will need to think about the outcome you want and what will be required to achieve it. You will also have to consider carefully any obstacles which could potentially distract you from your goal or disrupt your plan.

Fill out the four boxes below, applying the WOOP technique to your studies:

1. In the first box, write your wish or goal for your studies. Tip: You could use this technique every time you have a new assignment to work on

2. In the second box, write a clear description of what you want the outcome of this work to be. Imagine what the best possible result would be. How will you feel if you accomplish your goal?

3. In the third box, list anything which may get in the way of your achieving the outcome which you want.

4. In the fourth box, write a plan for how you will overcome any obstacles to ensure you meet your goal. What strategies will you use? Is there anything you need to organise/put in place to make sure you are successful?

Overcoming Procrastination: Effective Strategies

Step Three:

As an online learner, you will be responsible for motivating yourself to complete work to deadlines. Now that you have considered the obstacles, which might affect your ability to complete your work, you can start to develop strategies to deal with them. An effective strategy will help you to stay in control of your workload and keep organised and motivated.

Review the example strategy below and read through each step, then consider what your own personal strategy might look like.

Is there anything you do already which helps you when you are stuck?

Are there any other techniques, which you have learnt about in this resource/elsewhere which you could include?

1) First, make a list of all your tasks and assignments
2) Break each piece of work into smaller tasks. When you think about starting a big piece of work it can lead to negative feelings and then to procrastination. Breaking something like an assignment down into smaller tasks can help to reduce feelings of anxiety as it allows you to focus on one aspect at a time.
3) Order the tasks by priority. This will help you to see more easily where you should be directing your time and efforts.
4) Try to estimate how much time each task will take you to complete. If you are poor at estimating how long you need to complete a task, it is best to start by giving yourself more time than you think you really need
5) So your strategy so far is:
   - List what you need to do
   - Prioritize your list of tasks, decide what is most important and work out which order you will attempt them in.
   - Estimate how long each task will take.

After you have completed these steps you can then start to plan when you are going to complete each task.

6. As you complete the tasks on your list tick them off! It is important to recognise your achievements as this will help to build your motivation.

Do you want to discover more strategies to help you deal with procrastination?

The example strategy was taken from the My Learning Essentials online resource: [Now or never? Strategies for dealing with procrastination](#), ([downloadable version](#)). The online resources were developed in partnership with colleagues at the University of Manchester Counselling Service. See the full resource for further information.

Conclusion: What will you do differently?

Throughout this topic, you have considered:

- How you will schedule in your study around your life and existing commitments. You created a personalised study schedule, which will help you to find regular times to study.
- How the technique of spaced practice will allow you to study effectively in short sharp bursts in a way, which fits your study schedule.
- How you can stay motivated and overcome procrastination when studying for your course by keeping your goals in mind and recognising obstacles that you may have to overcome.

Activity: What will you do differently? Share your tips

Consider the following questions:

- Which strategies from this topic will you try out?
- How will you organise your studies in the future?
- Do you have any tips or strategies for time management and organisation which haven't been covered by this topic

Enter your thoughts and tips into this text box, once you've done that why not share your advice with other students on your course? For example, post a message on your course discussion board or start a new conversation or group about study strategies and planning your time. If you're feeling apprehensive about posting a message, the next sections 'Communicate' and 'Collaborate' will help you to consider your message and help you to build confidence communicating and collaborating online.

Section 2: Communicate

Why is communication an essential skill for an online learner?

In this topic you will practice a strategy to help you recognise the importance of your role and your audience's expectations when communicating your ideas effectively online.

Effective communication is an essential part of everyday life. It enables us to participate and engage with others in all areas: personal, professional and social.

The ability to communicate effectively is particularly important in an online learning environment as you will encounter many situations throughout your studies in which you will be required to engage with others to communicate your ideas, ask questions and share information.

Writing is the primary way in which you will communicate and it plays a vital role in your online learning. The written word represents your voice and you will communicate in a variety of different formats. Here are some key things to remember about written communication:

- Writing is slower than speaking: although you have more time to think about what you want to say, you cannot express yourself as quickly as you would in conversation.
- You don't receive non-verbal or physical cues: eye contact, nods or gestures are absent from online communication so it can be hard to know if what you are 'saying' has been understood.
- You don't always get immediate feedback: lack of feedback or response can be frustrating when you have limited time for your work.

Therefore, it is useful to have a strategy to make the most of opportunities to communicate with other students, and to ensure that you are clear, concise and appropriate when interacting with your tutor.

During your study you will communicate with others through a variety of different media and each will require you to write in an appropriate way. You may be:

- sending emails
- participating in discussion boards
- attending online classrooms (or webinars)
- instant messaging (for example, WhatsApp, Messenger etc.)
- writing blogs
- completing assessed work such as essays and presentations*

* your assignments require you to demonstrate your understanding of the topic / subject you are studying and are a key way in which you communicate this understanding to your tutors.

You will look at ways in which you can activate your voice through writing to help you to participate in your online course. You will need to develop a number of skills to do this effectively and the following pages will explore this in more detail.

Firstly, you will consider a strategy to help you to understand your role as a writer. Using this strategy will enable you to ensure that your writing communicates your ideas in a clear and consistent way that meets the expectations of your reader(s).

In addition, this strategy will ensure that your writing is properly planned and it will help you to begin thinking about how best to structure longer pieces of writing.

Following this, you will explore how you can communicate effectively with other students, your tutors, and those who may read your work.

Lastly, you will look at assessment, and how you can make your own voice heard whilst adhering to the required conventions of academic writing.

Improving the quality and style of your writing using a writing strategy

Using RAFT as a writing strategy for online communication

RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, Topic) is a writing strategy developed by Santa et al. (2004) to help students understand their role as a writer and to communicate clearly, appropriately and with purpose. RAFT can be a useful guide when writing online.

Here is an explanation of RAFT, which shows how you can use it:

When you are writing it is useful to think about:

- your role as a writer in each situation
- who your audience is
- the best format for you to use
- what you want to say

If you consider these things before you start writing, it will help you to ensure that you communicate in a clear and appropriate way. Using a strategy like this can help you communicate your intended message so that your voice is heard and others can respond.

Before you start to write you should consider the following:

Role

- What is my role as a writer in this situation?
- What is my intended purpose?
- What is my job here?
- What am I trying to do? (and likewise, what do I want to avoid?)

Audience

- Who will read what I am writing, who is 'listening' to what I am saying here?
- Is this a 'private' message, is it open to everyone?
- Should my writing be formal or informal?

Format

- What is the best (or most appropriate) way to communicate what I want to say?
- What medium should I use?
- How quickly do I need a response?

Topic

- What do I want to discuss?
- What is the subject matter?
- What do I want to say?
- What do I want to know?

Activity: Can you identify the elements of RAFT in this email from a student to their tutor?

Re: UCOL25002 Digital Society – Assessment 2

Dear Professor Quagga

I hope that you had a nice Easter vacation

I'm a third year undergraduate, and I'm taking your UCOL25002 Digital Society course unit this semester.

I am interested in writing about the ethics of how personal information is used by companies. I can't see an essay title that would easily allow me to write about this. However, I wondered if it would be OK if I incorporated this by completing the assignment which is focused on the "Internet of Things". I'm planning to write about how in the future "smart cities" will have the ability to collect people's data without them actually knowing, and talk about the ethics of this.

I asked about this on our Blackboard discussion board and the other students on my course told me that you had helped them with clarifying their research topic, and suggested I email you.

Please could you let me know if this would be suitable as a research topic for this assignment?

Thanks very much for your time

Answers:

ROLE

In this situation the role of the writer is to question and find out whether the topic they have chosen is suitable to meet the requirements of the assignment.

AUDIENCE

The audience here is the tutor, so the writer adopts a formal tone which is appropriate; they have clearly stated who they are and what they want to know.

FORMAT

Email has been chosen as the best format to communicate with the tutor in order to receive a timely and specific response. Although the writer did consult other students, they were advised to contact their tutor directly.

TOPIC

The subject heading of the email provides an indication of the subject matter (topic) so that the tutor knows what to expect and this is confirmed by the content of the email. Providing clear indication of what you want to know or say ensures that your reader knows how best to respond.

How can RAFT support you with your online communications?

Now, you will look at some different communication methods you may engage with as an online learner. The RAFT technique can help you to make the most of these opportunities so that you communicate in a clear, effective and appropriate way; this is essential for the successful completion of your course.

To make the most of your online learning, you should communicate regularly with your tutor and other students as both can be a great source of support as you progress through your studies.

Previously, you saw an example of how you might employ RAFT when constructing an email to your tutor, however, there are many ways you can interact with others and communicate as an online learner.

As mentioned earlier, some of the different ways in which you may communicate include:

- email
- discussion board
- online classroom
- instant messaging (for example, WhatsApp, Messenger etc.)
- blog posts

Each method uses a different format and provides different ways to communicate and connect with others. For example, an email can be a 'one to one' exchange (you send the email to your tutor and they respond). However, it can also be a 'one to many' exchange (your tutor will often email instructions or updates to the entire class). Instant messaging also allows for 'one to one' or 'one to many' communication. Discussion boards enable you to communicate and share with a much wider audience. Writing a blog post could allow you to share with a wide audience and utilise social media platforms.

It is important that you choose the appropriate format to communicate what you want to say. You should consider what it is you want to say and to whom, using which method. RAFT can help you to ensure you are communicating well, using the right methods, and that you are being understood.

Activity: What is the role of the writer and what is the best format?

In the following scenarios, we have provided you with the audience and the topic. You should choose what your role is and what is the best format to communicate in. You can select more than one option to answer each question. Click 'Feedback' to see our answers.

1. You need to find out which referencing style you should use for your assignment.

What is your role here? Roles: explaining, questioning, persuading, describing, exploring, contrasting, informing, enquiring.

What is the best format? Formats: email, discussion board, online classroom, instant messaging, blog.

> **Our suggestions:**
>
> **Role:** You are asking for information, so your role is questioning and/or enquiring
>
> **Format:** You would like to receive an answer, so email or discussion board are appropriate. As it is not a sensitive question, you could help other students to learn from your question - they may even help to answer it; we would choose a discussion board for this reason.

2. You have found a useful article that you want to share with other students.

What is your role here? Roles: explaining, questioning, persuading, describing, exploring, contrasting, informing, enquiring

What is the best format? Formats: email, discussion board, online classroom, instant messaging, blog.

> **Our suggestions:**
>
> **Role:** You would like to share information with other students, so your role is informing.
>
> **Format:** You could share by email or on a discussion board. It would more students if you shared it on a discussion board, so this is what we would choose.

3. You have read the recommended reading and do not fully understand some of the concepts and want to ask other students what they think.

What is your role here? Roles: explaining, questioning, persuading, describing, exploring, contrasting, informing, enquiring.

What is the best format? Formats: email, discussion board, online classroom, instant messaging, blog.

Our suggestions:

Role: You are asking for information, so your role is questioning and/or enquiring.

Format: The best places to discuss something like this with other students are a discussion board or online classroom. Choose an online classroom if your question is relevant to the classroom session, and the time is convenient. Otherwise, a discussion board may be more practical.

4. You want to improve your writing skills, start to publish your ideas, and share them with your online community.

What is your role here? Roles: explaining, questioning, persuading, describing, exploring, contrasting, informing, enquiring.

What is the best format? Formats: email, discussion board, online classroom, instant messaging, blog.

Our suggestions:

Role: By writing down your ideas you will be exploring and explaining, and by sharing your ideas you will be informing other students.

Format: We think that the best format for practising writing skills is a blog.

5. You want to get to know others on your course so that you have a supportive place to ask quick questions.

What is your role here? Roles: explaining, questioning, persuading, describing, exploring, contrasting, informing, enquiring.

What is the best format? Formats: email, discussion board, online classroom, instant messaging, blog.

> **Our suggestions:**
>
> **Role:** You are sharing information about yourself - informing - and asking for information about others - questioning and enquiring.
>
> **Format:** We feel this depends on the preferences of the group, but instant messaging is often appropriate for informal conversations like this.

How RAFT can help you to improve the quality and style of your academic writing for assignments

On this page you will look at how you can apply RAFT to your assignments to improve the quality and style of your academic writing.

Your assignments provide you with the opportunity to communicate what you know. You need to provide a clear, well organised and reasoned argument which provides an answer to the question you have been set. You also need to demonstrate critical engagement with your course material.

RAFT is a great way to ensure that your writing has an effective structure, that it meets the expectations of your reader and that you stay focused on your subject matter.

ROLE

It is crucial to recognise your role as the writer of the assignment; you need to read and analyse your assignment question very carefully to gain a clear understanding of what you are being asked to do. The question might ask you to persuade, to discuss, to inform, to justify etc. Each will require you to write in a slightly different way, so it is important to understand what is expected of you.

It is useful to look for instruction words which tell you how your tutor wants you to approach your assignment:

Consider the following title:

"Outline the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking for teenagers"

The instruction word is 'outline', which indicates your role. Your tutor is expecting you to give a description and explanation of the main benefits and drawbacks of social networking for teenagers.

Once you are clear about what your role is (and the job that you need your piece of writing to do) you are in a good position to start writing.

AUDIENCE

Your audience for your assessed work is likely to be your tutor, it is helpful to bear your audience (or your 'reader') in mind as you write; particularly as your audience will be responsible for assessing your work, providing you with marks and giving you feedback on how to improve.

Your assignment is your way of communicating what you have learnt whilst studying the course and a good assignment will usually demonstrate:

- knowledge and understanding of the topic studied
- an indication that you have researched the topic
- the ability to organise, present and critically evaluate supporting information

In order to ensure that you consider the reader your work should be:

- well structured, with a clear purpose that you outline at the beginning of the assignment.
- well presented, ensure that you follow course guidelines regarding formatting etc.
- referenced correctly using the agreed format to provide clear evidence of wider reading.
- a critical engagement with the literature which shows that you take a clear position in regard to the question posed and that you provide evidence (with analysis) to support your argument.

Considering how your work will be received by your audience helps you to refine your writing and ensure that you communicate clearly.

FORMAT

You should be given clear guidance as to how each piece of assessed work should be formatted, referenced and presented. Word count guidelines should always be adhered to otherwise you could lose marks.

In some cases you may be given a choice over which format to use (for example, an essay, a blog post, a presentation or a video) and this can be an opportunity to try something different. However, if you are unfamiliar with the format required and its related conventions (for example, if you have been asked to write a report and you are not sure what this entails) you should make sure that you are fully aware of what is expected of you before you start writing so that you don't lose any marks.

TOPIC

Your topic is the subject of your writing and you should make sure that you answer the question or fulfil the brief you have been given. Read the question carefully and break it down into sections to make sure you address each section. Look for topic words which set out what you should focus on and pay attention to limiting words to help you set the scope of your writing.

Look at the example again:

"Outline the benefits and drawbacks of online social networking for teenagers"

The topic words here are contained in the phrases 'online social networking' and 'benefits and drawbacks'. Your tutor will be expecting to see examples of some of these benefits and drawbacks in the content of your assignment.

The limiting word in this example is 'teenagers' so you should focus on this group specifically (not on younger children or adults).

Breaking down the question

Activity: Identifying instruction, topic and limiting words

Practice identifying instruction words, topic words and limiting words.

Look at some of the questions below (you don't have to do them all) and try to identify the **instruction**, **topic**, and **limiting** words. Not all questions will have limiting words. When you have decided, click the question to see if your answer matches ours.

1. Critically analyse the impact that terrorism has had on tourism.

- Instruction words: Critically analyse
- Topic words: terrorism, tourism
- Limiting words: (none)

2. Discuss the extent to which sustainable development is achievable in today's socio-economic and political context. In your answer include a definition of what is meant by sustainable development.

- Instruction words: Discuss, definition
- Topic words: sustainable development
- Limiting words: today's socio-economic and political context

3. Why and how do social movements resist globalisation?

- Instruction words: Why, how
- Topic words: social movements, globalisation
- Limiting words: (none)

4. To what extent do you find feminist interpretations of Genesis 1-5 successful? You must comment on at least two individual twentieth century biblical scholars' work in your answer.

- Instruction words: To what extent do you find, comment
- Topic words: female interpretations, Genesis 1-5
- Limiting words: two individual twentieth century biblical scholars' work

5. What evidence is there in The Butcher Boy to support the claim that it is not only a novel about a boy caught between childhood and adolescence, but also a novel about a culture torn between Irish and English values?

- Instruction words: What evidence is there
- Topic words: a boy caught between childhood and adolescence, a culture torn between Irish and English values
- Limiting words: (none)

6. How free is the current international system of trade?

- Instruction words: How
- Topic words: free, international system of trade
- Limiting words: current

7. Compare and contrast the objectives and methods of criminology and criminalistics.

- Instruction words: Compare, contrast
- Topic words: objectives and methods, criminology and criminalistics
- Limiting words: (none)

8. Review critically the factors required to make community-based natural resource management successful.

- Instruction words: Review critically
- Topic words: factors, community-based natural recouce management
- Limiting words: (none)

9. The European Court of Justice has recently ruled that obesity should be classified as a disability. Discuss.

- Instruction words: Discuss
- Topic words: European Court of Justice, obesity, disability
- Limiting words: recently

10. Are breakdowns in science communication primarily the fault of scientists or journalists? Use specific examples to illustrate your answer.

- Instruction words: Use specific examples, illustrate
- Topic words: breakdowns in science communication
- Limiting words: 'use specific examples' might also be seen as a limiter.

Engaging with your topic in a critical manner

Critical writing involves responding to the reading and research you have done in a way that goes beyond merely explaining what you have learnt. When you practise critical thinking you are analysing and questioning what you have read, making connections to other texts and ideas, and setting up your own position in relation to the topic which you can defend.

To find out more about how to write critically, use the My Learning Essentials resource: [Being Critical: thinking, reading and writing critically](#), ([downloadable version](#)).

Consolidate and reflect

You have focussed on communicating clearly with your tutor and with others in order to make the most of your online learning. Your writing is your voice and you need to ensure that you think about:

- your role (and how you are heard) in each learning situation.

- your audience and how they determine the way you communicate (for example, formally or informally).

- the best format for your communications (and whether they need to be 'one to one', or 'one to many').

- how you can present your topic clearly (what it is exactly that you want to say).

We have focussed on the various ways in which you can apply RAFT as a communication tool and a writing strategy to guide you in your written interactions. You have worked through a series of activities designed to help you to put the RAFT concept into practice and you have considered the need to develop a critical response to your subject in order to demonstrate your understanding and get the marks you need.

Activity: How might RAFT be useful to you?

Fill in the below to show why RAFT is useful for your online learning and your assessed work. Remember: when writing for assessment you need to communicate what you know and show evidence of critical thinking.

Section 3: Why collaboration is an essential skill for online learning

In this topic you will learn about the importance of collaboration and the benefits of collaborating effectively in the context of an online learning environment.

Effective collaboration is an essential part of many of the things we do at home, in the workplace and in the classroom. Collaborative learning is no less important if that 'classroom' happens to be online.

You will explore some of the challenges online learners face and explore strategies, which will help you to overcome these.

Activity: Your experience of projects

Think about a project on which you have collaborated. This might be an educational project, something at work or with friends and family.

- How did you provide support and how were you supported by others?
- What were the benefits of working with others?
- What did you learn?
- What might you do differently?

The benefits of collaborative online learning

Throughout this topic your exploration of collaborative learning will be informed by the framework outlined by Laal and Ghodsi (2012).

Discover some of the benefits of collaboration:

Social

- Active collaboration will allow you to build an effective support system during your studies. You and the other students on your course will have a different perspective on each topic, as well as different strengths and interests.

- Expand your understanding of the topic by drawing upon the ideas, perspectives and experiences of the other students on your course. In turn, share your own experience of the topic and what it means to you personally. By doing so you help to form a learning community – a positive environment where everyone recognises their shared goal (to learn) and supports each other in doing so.

Psychological

- By sharing ideas with others you can develop confidence in your own knowledge and skills. If you give support to others you will receive support in return. You will also gain affirmation of your understanding.

- Recognising and sharing any difficulties you might be having can help to reduce your anxiety. You might find others who can help explain a concept you are struggling with or who are sharing the same difficulties. Collectively you can talk through the idea or approach the course tutors for further support.

- Working collaboratively can help you to develop a positive relationship with your tutors. You might think of your tutor as a co-learner and supporter of your learning, rather than 'the expert'.

Academic

- Working collaboratively can help you to develop your critical thinking skills. Discussing your ideas and arguing your point can help you to think critically about the course content and resources. It also gives you the opportunity to assess other learners' ideas and opinions.

- Collaborative learning puts you at the centre of the learning process. Rather than passively 'absorbing' information you are taking an active part in your learning and that of the other students on your course.

- By sharing your response to particular challenges and by understanding how others respond, collaborative learning helps to model the appropriate problem solving techniques for your studies. You can then apply these techniques to similar problems.

Assessment

- You may be required to complete a piece of group work as part of your course assessment. Practicing effective collaboration throughout your studies will allow you to contribute positively in a group setting and understand how groups can work together successfully.

Making the most of your online learning

How to engage in online collaboration

Developing a positive online identity

The Communicate topic covers the importance of the written word in online learning. Presenting your ideas online should prompt you to consider how you come across online. Which aspects of your personality and interests will you present to your tutor and other students on your course.

Facilitating good quality discussion

When learning online, it may take longer to receive a response to questions and comments. However, you will have more time to think about your responses and you can expect the responses you receive from others to be more considered. All of this can lead to a better quality conversation.

Making efficient use of your time

When you are completing a piece of group work online you might find it difficult to find a time when everybody can work on the project together. By planning ahead you can make sure that you and your group make the most efficient use of the time you have. At the start of the project communicate with your group members to gain a realistic picture of their schedule and commitments. Agree on deadlines, divide up work and consider how you will share ideas and updates on progress. You may finish your input at 22:00 China Standard Time and leave comments and instructions for your colleague to pick up on their lunch break at 13:00 Greenwich Mean Time.

Make the most of the diversity of your group

Whenever you undertake a group project remember that you will be working with a group of individuals with a wide range of skills, knowledge and experiences. This is especially true of online groups. Consider how you might use this diversity to the advantage of the group. Find out if anyone has experience of completing a similar task, use the wide-ranging knowledge in the group to problem-solve and make good use of the different skills each individual possesses. Later in the resource you will get the chance to explore group work in more detail.

Keep communications professional

In an online environment it is not possible to use non-verbal cues such as body language and tone of voice to supplement your verbal communication. Before you write responses to comments or materials consider how your message will be perceived. During your course there may be times when you want to disagree or question someone else's point of view. Asking questions and stimulating debate is great for both your learning and that of other students. However, when you challenge others make sure that you do so in a thoughtful and professional way.

Write your thoughts clearly, avoiding phrases or language that may confuse. Finally, proofread before you post. Communicating online requires you to be considerate and accurate.

Humour can be effective and at times relevant in discussion, but you should avoid using sarcasm as it does not translate well in the online environment.

Activity: Collaboration skills

What skills have you used to collaborate in a face-to-face setting? Think about how you could apply or adapt those skills for online collaboration? What are the benefits to online collaboration for you and the way you work?

Engaging with the online learning community

Sometimes we are asked to collaborate on an assignment or project. At other times we work with people in less formal ways. Engaging in a learning community is a great way to share ideas and gain support.

Unlike the classroom, online conversations (for example, on a discussion board) can take place over a long period of time. The drawback might be having to wait for a response from another learner or tutor, who may not be accessing the discussion at the same time as you. A major benefit of this kind of communication is that it allows time for thoughtful, considered responses - leading to a better quality of discussion.

It is through these interactions - posting and making comments on other students' posts - that the online learning community is built.

If you haven't already done so, think about how you engage with students and tutors online. Below are some tips to help you do this.

Tips for engaging online:

- Not confident enough to post? - take a few steps towards this by liking others' comments (or posting short replies) which can then lead up to posting your own comments. Your views are just as important as those of other students.
- Not sure what to talk about? Geography - ask where other students are located. Find out if any students are in similar time zones. They could be an important part of your online support community.
- Ask questions – this can help you deepen your knowledge of a subject. Spend time researching and thinking about how to phrase your question before you add it to the discussion to ensure you get the information you need.

Why not share a post introducing yourself to other students on your course? You could include a picture or video and mention where you live and some of your interests. This can help you and other students to feel more connected, and encourage others to post.

Note:

For online learning courses, sharing short video clips and/or audio clips has been shown to help build trust among peers (Kennedy, Bruce, & Young, 2013) which aids collaboration.

What skills are required for successful online group work - what skills do you bring to the team?

Group Work

Group work gives you the opportunity to share ideas, and learn from and with other people. It's important that you learn both how to contribute in an online group setting and how groups themselves can work more effectively.

As you engage in your online learning community you will start to gain an understanding of each other's strengths and skills. In group work think about what are your strengths and those of the other students on your course.

- Who will be interested in carrying out research, organising the project, recording results or analysing the information you find?
- How will you ensure that the workload is spread evenly among the group?

A complex task will require a range of skills. Successful collaboration makes best use of the team's skills, knowledge and experience, with each member taking on a role.

Tips for group work:

Remember to be flexible as you won't always be able to work to your strengths.

There has been much research into team roles, the most well-known is Belbin.

Team Member Types:

Leader

Strengths: solidifies the group's goals and aims, helps to direct group conversations on discussion boards and makes the difficult decisions.

Weaknesses: May become focussed on personal rather than group goals.

Creative

Strengths – brings creativity, innovative ideas and problem solving to the group.

Weaknesses – can be unrealistic and lose sight of the group's goals.

Planner

Strengths – turns the team's ideas and actions into clear, structured plans, utilising time-management and task-management tools as appropriate.

Weaknesses – can become inflexible and unwilling to take on ideas which move away from the plan created.

Communicator

Strengths – helps the team to understand each other's ideas, mediating conflict - a key skills when communicating online.

Weaknesses – can be indecisive and unwilling to present their own ideas.

Finisher

Strengths – shows an attention to detail, ensuring the team continues to move forward and put plans into action.

Weaknesses – can become too worried by the details, taking on too much work and unwilling to delegate.

Activity: Skills for effective teamwork

Think about the last group project you worked on.

- What skills did others bring and was the work shared fairly?
- What skills did you bring to the team?
- If you were to attempt the project again, what do you think should be done differently?

Collabrate - conclusion and reflection

To think about what you have learned, we will describe a fictional online learning student and ask you how she could help herself across four aspects of collaborative learning.

> "Hello everyone, my name is Lisa and I am from Montreal in Canada. My first language is French but I can speak English pretty well. I have a young son and also a part-time job in a Management position. As this is the first time I have enrolled on a major online learning programme I am a bit nervous about joining in and getting started. Has anyone got any tips or hints for me that might help? Looking forward to hearing from you all."

Benefits

How do you think Lisa could reduce her nervousness about collaborating online?

Answer: There are many small steps that Lisa could take to get experience collaborating online. She could read and "like" posts made by others that she agrees with, then start to write comments without publishing them, before publishing something for everyone to read when ready.

Community and challenges

Consider the use of a discussion board or shared document (for example, you may use tools such as Google Drive or Evernote to collaborate on documents). How do you think Lisa could take advantage of being in a different time zone to many other students on her course?

Answer: There is likely to be a delay between posting your comment and many other people reading it. Consider taking your time to read other people's comments thoroughly before writing your own. This will be especially helpful if English is not your first language, as you will have more time to proofread before posting.

Group work

Lisa has experience managing a team of people and leading on projects face-to-face but not online. What skills do you think is she likely to use when collaborating online and what skills might she wish to develop?

Answer: As a leader, Lisa is likely to be able to clarify the group's goals, guide discussions and make difficult decisions. She might be focused on personal goals rather than group goals, which should help inspire her to practice and improve her online communication techniques.

In this section you have considered and reflected on the importance and benefits of collaboration in the online learning environment. Think about:

- how you are going to collaborate with other students on your course;
- what you can do to identify any issues that could prevent you from collaborating effectively; and
- the skills and strategies that you need to be a successful collaborator.

We have explored different ways which collaboration can be used to enhance online learning. You have considered your online identity, managing your time, making best use of everyone's skills, and being professional. You should now understand why effective collaboration is essential to your success as an online learner.

Activity: How will you collaborate?

Use the box below to write down your reflections on the below prompts

- How are your experience and requirements different from Lisa?
- How useful do you think that online collaboration is to your learning? You could write three actions to develop your confidence in this area.
- How is important is collaboration and communication to you when learning online? You could write 3 reasons why it's important.

Conclusion – Essential Skills for Online Learning

Throughout this resource you have considered three skills which are essential for successful online learning: organisation, communication and collaboration.

Remember:

- Consider your individual commitments and recognise factors which might distract you from your work, then use strategies and plan a realistic timetable to suit you.
- When you are communicating with others, think about your role as a writer, your audience, the best format to use, and the topic or message you want to get across.
- Be an active member of your online learning community by offering support to your fellow learners and building on the ideas you share.

Refer back to the goals you set at the beginning of the resource in the Introduction. Have you met them or are there areas where you would like to develop further?

What next?

You should now feel more confident in organising yourself, getting your message across and interacting with others online!

Activity: What first step will you take in each of these areas to ensure that you keep developing these skills?

Write down one thing you will do in each of the areas below:

- Organise
- Communicate
- Collaborate

This concludes the Essential Skills for Online Learning, created by The University of Manchester Library. We hope you have enjoyed learning more about the essential skills: organise, communicate and collaborate. You can return to the resource at any point to continue your learning.

Thank you and goodbye from all of us, or as we say in Manchester, 'ta ra'!