Online Learners' Guide

When learning in an online environment, it's more important than ever to be an independent and active participant in your own learning. Everyone needs to make an extra effort online. Use these practical tips to help you.

Participating in an Online Class

A. Listen Actively

- **Sit or stand at a desk** during your online class. While it's OK to relax on the sofa when you're online for fun, it's best to treat your online class like any other classroom.
- **Don't try to do other things** while you are participating in class. Be an active listener and give speakers your full attention. Put your phone away.
- **Keep your video on.** If you don't want to watch yourself speak on camera, most conferencing platforms will allow you to hide your own video, but others can still see you.
- **Use the chat feature** and reactions during class. This shows that you are paying attention and will help you remember the information you are learning.

B. Take Turns

- **Raise your hand or use the "raise your hand" feature** when you want to speak or ask a question. The class can also agree on some gestures to use to indicate that someone wants to communicate something. For example:

I have a question.   I agree.   I have an answer.
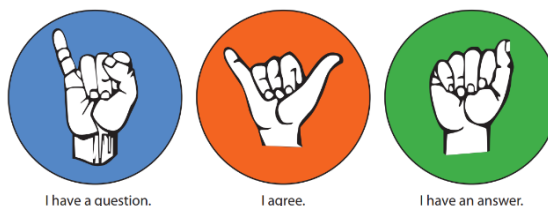
Source: *Breaking Through the Screen*, National Geographic Learning/Cengage Learning, 2022

- **Mute your mic.** Unmute when you want to talk. This cuts down on noise and confusion.
- **Identify yourself** when speaking in a large group to make it easier for others to recognize you.

C. When You Take Notes

- You may want to **use a pen and paper or a writing tablet** so you can use the computer screen just for your online class. If you are taking notes on the same computer you are using to access your class, make sure that you can still see the class video window.

D. Set Yourself Up for Success

- **Make sure your full name is clearly displayed** for everyone to see.
- If you can't use video, **upload a profile picture** of yourself.
- **Set up your background.** It's best to sit in a clean, well-lit space, or you can use a digital background.
- **Work in a quiet space.**
- **Consider using headphones.** This will improve the sound quality and filter out background noise.
- **Remember that the chat function is public.** Use the chat only to share information related to your class.

Working in Pairs and Groups Online

A. Pay attention to others.

It can be hard to read other peoples' facial expressions or body language when we're online. While you are speaking, **watch for signs that other people want to say something**, such as un-muting, leaning forward, and gesturing.

B. Ask for attention.

Sometimes it can be hard to get a chance to say something. Some communication specialists recommend you **use a short filler word**, like "Um" or "Uh." Just saying a small word like this can show that you have something to say, and it gives the other speaker time to finish.

C. Ask for repetition.

Sometimes it's very hard to hear other people online. You may have to **ask for repetition more often** than you might in person. It's also OK to ask for repetition more than once.

D. Interrupt.

If you have something to say, you may have to interrupt politely. If you are interrupted, you can take a moment to finish your thought. **Don't be discouraged** if someone else talks over you. This often happens online. If this happens and you let someone else speak, you can always add your thoughts later.

E. Choose a starter.

If you can't get the discussion started, choose someone at random (e.g., the person with the most recent birthday or the last person to turn on their mic). This person is the **"starter"** and **goes first**. Whenever the conversation stops, the Starter helps get it going again by asking a question or building on something that was said.

F. Pass the turn.

If you're having trouble keeping a conversation going, a group can agree to **pass the conversation**. After you finish speaking, you name someone else to take a turn. That next person should say something in response or offer a new idea and then continue passing the conversation. Make sure everyone takes a turn. If you have something to say and want to have the conversation passed to you, raise your hand.

G. Encourage others.

Everyone in a discussion should take responsibility for its success. Encourage everyone to take a turn. If people in the group haven't spoken, **ask for others' ideas**.

To make sure everyone contributes, each group member can **choose a role** to play during a discussion.

- Leader: Sets the goals and makes sure group members participate.
- Recorder: Takes notes and writes down any final outcomes.
- Timer: Makes sure all the tasks are done within the time allowed.
- Checker: Makes sure all questions are answered or tasks completed.
- Reporter: Reports back to the teacher on progress and asks for help when needed.

H. Leave time.

Leave a little time at the end of a group discussion to **sum up** and make sure everyone understands the outcome of the discussion.

Presenting Online

A. Look at your camera, not your screen.

Whether you're online or in-person, it's important to make eye contact when you are presenting. The only way to make eye contact when you are talking to an online audience is to **look at the lens of your camera**. It might feel strange at first, but it will help keep the audience's attention and make you seem more confident. You can occasionally look at your audience to make sure they are following you.

B. Interact with your audience.

When you're presenting online, it is difficult to know if your audience is paying attention if you can't see them. It's OK to **ask your audience to turn on their cameras**. If your presentation takes place in a classroom but has virtual participants, make sure you include everyone and don't just talk to the people in the room.

C. Use your voice.

Because it's harder to use body language and hand gestures online, you need to use your voice to communicate your message. **Make sure to use a lot of variety in your voice**, and make sure you practice.

D. Use facial expressions and small hand gestures.

Your audience can't see very much of you online, but they will still see your head, shoulders, and some of your hand gestures. You should **look interested and excited to present**. You can also use small hand gestures near your face to emphasize points.

E. Stand farther from your camera.

If you have the room, it's even better to **stand farther back from your camera** so your hands and upper torso are showing. This allows your audience to see your body language and gestures better.

F. Use slides appropriately.

To share an image online, you will need to share your screen. This will take the audience's attention off of your face, so it needs to be important.

- **Use slides to focus your audience** on the main ideas and most important information.
- **Keep your slides simple**. Too much information will distract from what you are saying.
- You can **add a blank slide** in between some content slides. This will help you transition between ideas and help your audience refocus.
- **Don't share your screen the whole time**. Eye contact helps your audience stay focused. Especially during your introduction and closing, stop sharing and talk to the camera directly.
- Make sure you **know how your screen will look** when you share it and that you can see your notes. If you also need to share audio, make sure you use the correct setting.

G. Clean up your desktop.

Make sure you have any unnecessary files or browser tabs closed. Since you will be sharing your screen, **you don't want your audience to become distracted**.