

STUDENT GUIDE

TO ONLINE LEARNING

VERSION 2, FALL 2018



In partnership with



MICHIGAN VIRTUAL LEARNING[®]
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



Wisconsin

Digital Learning Collaborative

Innovate. Collaborate. Educate.

About Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute

In 2012, the Governor and Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring Michigan Virtual™, formally Michigan Virtual University®, to establish a research center for online learning and innovation. Known as Michigan Virtual Learning Research Institute® (MVLRI®), this center is a natural extension of the work of Michigan Virtual. Established in 1998, Michigan Virtual's mission is to advance K–12 digital learning and teaching through research, practice, and partnerships. Toward that end, the core strategies of MVLRI are:

- **Research** – Expand the K–12 online and blended learning knowledge base through high quality, high impact research;
- **Policy** – Inform local, state, and national public education policy strategies that reinforce and support online and blended learning opportunities for the K–12 community;
- **Innovation** – Experiment with new technologies and online learning models to foster expanded learning opportunities for K–12 students; and
- **Networks** – Develop human and web-based applications and infrastructures for sharing information and implementing K–12 online and blended learning best practices.

Michigan Virtual dedicates a small number of staff members to MVLRI projects as well as augments its capacity through a fellows program drawing from state and national experts in K–12 online learning from K–12 schooling, higher education, and private industry. These experts work alongside Michigan Virtual staff to provide research, evaluation, and development expertise and support.

About the Wisconsin Digital Learning Collaborative

As a statewide collaborative effort, WDLC shares knowledge and resources with K–12 schools, districts, and agencies who want to start or improve their online and blended learning practice. WDLC offers quality planning strategies, connections to implementation solutions, and peer-led learning opportunities that empower schools and districts to meet a wide array of learner needs for choice, flexibility, and instructional support.

WDLC has three focus areas: planning, implementation, and quality. In each of these areas we collectively work with local, state, and national experts to elevate quality. Strategies, resources, national experts, and events will evolve based on the needs and voice from the field.

WDLC consists of three collaborating organizations, the Wisconsin Virtual School (WVS), the Wisconsin eSchool Network (WEN), and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) through an executed Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs). Together, WVS and WEN form the foundation of the WDLC with DPI as the state agency holding the MOUs. This partnership provides a single point for schools to access quality online and blended learning.

In addition to the founding entities, WDLC includes field experts, practitioners from K–12 schools, districts, and agencies who want to contribute to quality and practice, and other stakeholders who have interest or influence in the digital learning space.

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Look for this bubble to find comments and advice from students who have taken courses online.



Look for this light bulb to find comments and advice from mentors and teachers who work with students who take online courses.

Introduction

This guide is for middle and high school students who are interested in taking courses online. Most of the content comes from teachers, mentors, and students who have personal experience with online teaching and learning.

Virtual learning is a great option for many students and can be a very effective way to learn. Because taking virtual courses is quite different from taking courses in your traditional face-to-face classroom, it's good to know what you're getting into and what kind of support you'll need to be successful before classes start. Research shows that students who are well prepared and well supported for this new experience do better in their classes.

In this guide, you will find:

- ✓ Questions to help you decide if online learning is right for you,
- ✓ Characteristics of successful online learners,
- ✓ Suggestions for how to prepare for learning online, and
- ✓ Comments and advice from students about their experience with virtual classes.

Why do you want to take an online class?

Students take courses online for several reasons—some academic and some personal. Think about why you want to take a virtual class:

- **Learning at your preferred pace . . .** Do you understand information better if you can review video or text on your own before doing an assignment?
- **Learning 21st-century skills . . .** Do you want to be better prepared for college and a career?
- **Getting ahead in school . . .** Do you want to complete required classes so you have more room in your schedule for electives?
- **Getting caught up in school . . .** Do you need to take a class to earn a higher grade?
- **Taking courses your school doesn't offer . . .** Are you interested in special electives or advanced courses in core subjects?
- **Avoiding a schedule conflict . . .** Is the course offered at a time that doesn't fit in your schedule?
- **Accommodating health or social challenges . . .** Would it be better for you if you didn't have to go to the school building to take classes?



I liked how different the experience was. It was not like my usual classes!



This is too much work compared to regular school classes.

Recent research¹ has shown that students taking virtual classes for credit recovery or based on their learning preference do not perform as well as students who take the classes for the other reasons listed above. It may take more effort on your part and more support from your parents/guardians, mentor², online instructor, or others to help you stay involved and on pace and complete your course effectively if you are taking it for credit recovery or because of a learning preference.

¹ Bae, J (2016). *Cross-Classified Multilevel Modeling for Program Evaluation of State Virtual School*. Manuscript in preparation.

² A mentor is the person at the school who is assigned to support you as you work through your virtual course.

What do students like about taking virtual courses?

Talk with your parent or guardian or someone at school about why you think you'd like taking classes online. The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance has identified several reasons students give for choosing virtual classes. The students they asked say it's because online courses are:

- Flexible
- Accessible
- Relevant
- Personalized
- Interactive
- Collaborative
- Self-paced
- Challenging



I really like being able to relax and just work on my class and finishing my work early and to the best of my ability.



I liked how easy it was to navigate the course and how I could work on it at home and school.



I enjoyed the scrapbook assignments that made us use current news to apply our course knowledge in an explanation of the environmental issue at hand.

What do you need to think about before deciding to enroll in a virtual course?



This class was really hard for me. I would not recommend this to somebody that has a hard time learning by themselves or somebody who needs a class full of people to help them.



I really enjoyed everything in this class. I was able to learn everything that I have struggled with before.



My favorite part of this course were the activities. They stretched your mind to fit what was given.

Learning online is a very different experience and takes different skills than learning in a face-to-face classroom, but virtual courses are just as important. Your online course grades are part of your permanent school record. Talk with your parents or guardian and guidance counselor about your readiness for online learning. Use the Online Learner Readiness Rubric on the next page to help you discuss the following questions:

- Are you interested in the class?
- Do you have a dedicated place where you can study?
- Do you have access to a computer and the Internet so you can work on classes at home and outside of the school day?
- Do you have good reading and writing skills?
- Are you confident communicating in both spoken and written language?
- Are you ready and willing to initiate a conversation with a teacher and ask for assistance when you need it?
- Do you have the discipline and motivation to take on all the parts of your course (for example, reading, assignments, labs, tests, and projects) without being in a classroom?
- Can you use teacher comments on your assignments to improve your work?
- Do you have good technology skills beyond social media?
- Do you have good support at school and at home?
- Do you have time each day to spend two hours on your virtual course?



Any pace, any place, any time learning sounds great, and it is for some students. Most students like the flexibility of being able to study when and where it is convenient for them. However, any pace can be a problem. Some courses don't have specific due dates for every assignment, quiz, or test. Many students comment in their end-of-semester surveys that they would like specific deadlines for assignments so they cannot put things off and get behind so easily. Remember that you have to take full responsibility for your time management and complete and submit assignments and assessments on time.

Online Learner Readiness Rubric

Name:

Developed by:  MICHIGAN VIRTUAL™

Student Readiness	Technology Skills	Work & Study Habits	Learning Style	Technology / Connectivity	Time Management	Interest/ Motivation	Reading/Writing Skills	Support Services
Less Ready	Student has little, if any, experience using a computer or the Internet and has minimal desire to develop more skills in this area.	Student often needs reminders to complete routine assignments, often turns homework in late and is not able to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course.	Student is not a self-directed learner and often requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student does not have consistent access to a computer and a reliable connection to the Internet at home or at school.	Student does not manage his or her time effectively in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has little or no interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a negative or unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading below grade level and has experienced difficulty with routine writing assignments.	In general, parents and school personnel do not actively support online learning and are unable or unwilling to provide support assistance.
	↓	Student sometimes needs reminders and assistance in completing routine assignments and has pledged to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course enrollment.	Student is beginning to demonstrate a behavior of self-directed learning and sometimes requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow up support.	Student has limited access to a computer with low-speed Internet service at school or at home.	Student is beginning to demonstrate effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering but has expressed concerns about enrolling in an online course or has an unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at grade level and has demonstrated limited proficiency with writing assignments.	Student support system is limited and parents and school personnel are somewhat supportive of enrollment in online courses.
More Ready	Student has strong computer skills and more than adequate experience using a word processor, email application and web browser.	Student rarely needs reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments and has demonstrated good independent study habits.	In general, the student is self-directed and does not require real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student has consistent access to a computer with moderate-speed Internet service at home or at school.	Student has demonstrated effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at or above grade level and has demonstrated success with a variety of writing assignments.	Student has open access to school-based mentoring/ counseling service and parental support.
	↓	Student does not need reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments, usually finishes homework ahead of time and has successfully completed an independent study experience or taken an online course.	Student is a self-directed learner and demonstrates a high level of comfort and skill in learning new material without requiring real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and deals well with ambiguity.	Student has daily access to a computer with high-speed Internet service at home and at a convenient location in the school building before, during and after regular school hours.	Student has demonstrated outstanding time management skills while participating in a variety of clubs, student organizations, sports and work activities.	Student has a strong interest in the content area of the online course offering, is highly motivated to enroll in an online course and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading above grade level, has strong reading comprehension skills and has demonstrated success with complex writing assignments.	Student has regularly scheduled access to school-based mentoring/ counseling services, parental support is strong and district has adopted policies and identified best practices to support students as online learners.

Note: This rubric was not designed to be used as a tool to determine eligibility for enrollment in online courses, but instead to be used as a resource to help identify specific areas where students may need additional support to better ensure success.

How do you decide what course is right for you?



Take your online class as seriously as you do your courses in school. Remember: your virtual class goes on your permanent record, too.



Talk with your parents/guardians, your counselor, and your mentor about the virtual courses you want to take.



If you're an athlete, remember to see that the course you want to take meets NCAA guidelines.



Talk with other students who have taken virtual courses. They can tell you about their ups and downs and may spark some questions you'd like to ask your school support person before you commit to an online course.

Your decision about which class you take online is very important. The class and the grade you receive go on your permanent record, just like your other courses.

Ask yourself these questions and discuss your options with your parents/guardians and counselor or someone else at your school before you decide what courses you want to take.

- Is the course content something that interests you?
- What prerequisites do you need?
- What kind of assignments will you have?
- What software is required?
- How much contact will you have with the teacher and other students?
- Do you have any special needs that require adaptive technology to take the class online?

There are many different providers of online courses, so each course and your experience in that course environment may be very different. Start and end dates and when and how you need to be present online for class may differ, too.

Schedule an appointment with your guidance counselor or the person at your school who registers students for classes—to get you signed up for the online course that is right for you. In some cases, if you are homeschooled, you will need to be enrolled through a school.

What kind of support will you have?

When you take a class in school, your teacher and other students are in the room with you if you have questions. You have a place to sit and books and materials to work with close by. Maybe a laptop or tablet, too. When you learn virtually—not in your face-to-face classroom—your school may have another place for you to work on your course (for example, the library/media center or a special lab), but you may be responsible for creating your own space both at school and at home. You also need to know how to contact and ask for help from the people involved in your online learning:



You must be willing and able to contact your online instructor. Many students are afraid to do this, but your success depends on it.



COURSE INSTRUCTOR—The person who is teaching your virtual course is the first one to go to when you have questions about assignments or resources.



TECHNOLOGY STAFF—Most schools have people who oversee the computer labs and learning technology and may be able to help with any technology questions or problems you have.



HELP DESK—Some online providers have a contact email or phone number in case you have issues with the course that your mentor, parent, or instructor can't resolve.



PARENT/GUARDIAN – Your parents or guardians may have access to your course, too. It is best if they check in with you regularly to be sure you are keeping up and help maintain the space identified for you to use as a study area. If you are homeschooled, your parent or guardian is probably your mentor, too.



PEERS—Friends who have taken virtual courses can encourage you and be a big help in troubleshooting. Classmates in your online course can also show or tell you about course features or assignments.



OTHERS—Some schools have additional staff who support online learners, for example counselors or the librarian or media center staff.



I wish I had used my time wisely and used the pacing guide more. It helped me set specific due dates. I just didn't work on my class as hard as I should have.



I enjoyed the interaction with classmates in the form of discussion board posts that allowed us to debate and discuss our ideas. It allowed me to share my opinions with my peers and see different sides of situations.

Do you want to take more than one virtual course?



I like that even though I have actually never seen my teacher, I know she's there because she comments on all of my work telling me what I did good on or what I need to improve on.



I liked being able to send messages for instructions to my instructor.

If this is your first experience taking a class online, try taking one just to see what it's like. The decision to allow you to enroll in virtual courses may be made based on several criteria. Discuss the following questions with your parents/guardians first and then with your school counselor:

1. Do you have the prerequisite knowledge and skills you need to be successful in the course?
2. Have you failed the same course in a face-to-face class?
3. Did you already earn credits in the same course?
4. Does the course fit with your remaining graduation requirements or career interests?
5. Is the online course sufficiently rigorous and of high quality?



³ [https://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(qz0zy3oh2kywq4c5pgfaov1q\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-388-1621](https://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(qz0zy3oh2kywq4c5pgfaov1q))/mileg.aspx?page=GetObject&objectname=mcl-388-1621)

How do you prepare for taking a virtual course?



I really enjoyed doing the listening and speaking activities in my Japanese class. I felt like in a regular class I wouldn't get to listen to such a fluent speaker so many times. I can literally just click the repeat button and keep speaking after the speaker. In class they only say it one to two times.



It is difficult for many students to complete these labs if they do not have access to all the materials or a computer at home.

Many students think that they are ready to take a class online, but they do not know much about how the classes are delivered or what kind of technology the classes require or how assignments and tests are handled.

One way to learn more about what an online course is really like is to talk with other students who have taken virtual courses. Remember that courses have very different structures, content, and assignments; and the student-teacher and student-student interaction can also be very different.

We encourage you to reach out to your local program or school and ask for more information about what it means to be an online learner. You can ask to see a demonstration of tools, systems, and expectations. You may also speak with a teacher to get a better understanding of the program. The following are four items to dig into prior to enrolling in an online course:

1. Knowing What to Expect,
2. Technical Skills You'll Need,
3. Learning Skills You'll Need, and
4. Managing Day-to-Day.



We know students do best when they spend time on their online course every day. How full is your schedule with your face-to-face classes, employment, extracurricular and other activities? Do you have time during the evenings and on weekends to work on your course?

The *Mentor Guide to Online Learning* and the *Parent Guide to Online Learning* are two resources created to increase awareness of the nature of online learning, the opportunities online learning offers, and the challenges teachers, parents, guardians, mentors, and educational decision-makers face to increase the likelihood of student success in their online courses. Both are available as free PDF downloads.

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