

Communication Skills for Remote Learning

Good Communication

Being able to communicate effectively is essential for your success in your remote learning courses. There are many different ways you'll communicate with your instructor and classmates, so we want to help you hone your communication skills. First, we'll introduce you to common terms you'll need to know and then familiarize you with some concepts that can help you to be successful in your classes.

Definitions

Let's begin with a few important definitions.

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Canvas and RioLearn are our Learning Management Systems (LMS) that we use to deliver your courses to you, depending on your college. They also let you communicate with your instructor and classmates.

Communication Types

There are two types of communication that you will be using during your remote learning course—time delayed and real-time interaction communication.

Time delayed communication occurs at different times. For example, when you email your instructor and get a reply the following day, or when your classmates respond to your comments on the discussion board hours after the fact.

Real-time interaction communication happens in real-time, such as when you have an in-person discussion in a traditional classroom. There are numerous tools that enable you to communicate online in real-time such as:

- Chat apps like Canvas's integrated chat
- Internet voice or video calling systems like Jabber or Google Hangouts
- Web-based video conferencing software like WebEx and Jabber

Discussion Boards

The **discussion board** is a virtual forum or message board hosted on Canvas or RioLearn where time delayed discussions occur. Your instructor may post a prompt to initiate a debate or invite students to post a topic to start a discussion thread. Both methods can be equally effective.

Chat

Canvas has a text-based chat feature that will allow you to exchange messages with others who are online at the same time as you. Sometimes instructors will use the chat feature as a way to hold office hours or a study session. Because chat happens in real-time, there is a sense of immediate gratification—you don't have to wait hours or days for a response like you might have to with email.

Voice or Video Calls

Several free software applications, like Jabber or Hangouts, enable you to make voice or video calls over the Internet. Once you download, register, and install the software, you'll probably want to plug in a headset or a microphone and speakers so that you can hear others and they can hear you more clearly. If you are using video, you'll need a webcam, but many newer computers and laptops now include this as part of their standard equipment.

Video Conferencing

Video Conferencing is a way to support larger virtual groups regardless of the location of individual members. Software applications, such as WebEx can provide a virtual experience that closely replicates an on-campus classroom complete with real-time interaction and collaboration. Many video conferencing applications include useful features like:

- Desktop sharing
- File sharing
- Online chat windows
- Break-out rooms for small group work

Netiquette

Netiquette is the correct or acceptable way to communicate online—it's the code of online etiquette you should abide by, especially when in an academic or professional setting. This goes for both time delayed and real-time interaction communication. Netiquette includes respectful behavior, appropriate language, and an acknowledgment of other people's privacy. Keep in mind that while on a video conference you want to stay on "mute" unless you are speaking. This helps keep background noises from interfering with your meeting.

Remember, your classroom discussions should be much more formal than the type of discussions you may have with your friends on social media.

Student Questions and Answers

Here are some typical questions that students have about communicating online.

Student Question 1:

Ok, so you've told us about the differences between time delayed and real-time interaction communication. But what does this mean for me?

Answer 1: Remote learning and online class communication often take place; time delay, gives you a chance to research, write, and edit your answers, instead of being put on the spot during class. It is an opportunity to reflect and compose your thoughts carefully before responding.

On the other hand, real-time interaction sessions are often more lively because interactions are immediate since everyone is in the virtual room at the same time, and they can help a class bond more quickly.

Student Question 2:

Will my online communications be permanent?

Answer 2: Yes, when you communicate time delayedly online, you create a permanent record. All of your electronic communication will be dated, and can be easily organized, stored, and reviewed (usually for grading purposes) at a later date. Because your words are enduring, it is a good idea to compose your electronic communications carefully before posting.

Student Question 3:

Is online communication easier than face-to-face communication in a classroom?

Answer 3: It can be. When you communicate through email, private messages, a discussion board, or a blog, you're somewhat anonymous. Your instructor and classmates may not know your age, gender, race, ethnicity, or other physical characteristics. Some shy or introverted students find that this environment gives them a boost of confidence.

Student Question 4:

Will there be more potential for misunderstanding when I'm communicating online?

Answer 4: This is a valid concern. Because the teacher and your classmates cannot see your body language or hear your voice, they might misinterpret your written words. Review your written communications carefully before posting and try to remove any language that could be interpreted as offensive or inappropriate. Ensure you are providing enough detail so your reader(s) has a solid frame of reference for what you are communicating.

Student Question 5:

Can I make friends in an online course?

Answer 5: Absolutely! If you're normally reserved in front of other people, an online environment can make it feel like you can express your ideas more freely. Discussion boards often create a real sense of community as you respond to your instructor's and other students'

posts, and they respond to yours. In an online course, everyone has a chance (and is expected) to speak.

Student Question 6:

I thought that I would be able to do all of my online work on my own schedule. Will any of my online course communication be real-time interaction?

Answer 6: It depends on the course, but it is likely! Many online instructors use online chat or conferencing tools like WebEx. It will also provide a nice contrast to the time delayed communication you'll be doing in your course, because it presents an opportunity to be more interactive. Check your syllabus to see if your instructor has scheduled any real-time interaction sessions and make note of those dates and times— these will take place in real-time, so you don't want to miss class!

Student Question 7:

Can you give me some tips for writing effectively in an online educational environment? I don't want to get started on the wrong foot.

Answer 7: Of course! Writing effectively is an advantage in an online course and essential to your success. Here are some helpful suggestions for top notch writing:

- Always proofread your writing for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors
- Keep your posts concise
- Avoid slang and offensive language
- Rewrite a negative comment so it is constructive and creates helpful discussion

Note It's ok to disagree with someone in a post, but being disagreeable or making personal attacks is not.

Student Question 8:

Ok, so how do I go about writing a respectful and respectable discussion post?

Answer 8: First, make sure that you read your instructor's directions and follow them carefully. This is the most basic way of showing respect for your instructor and the others in the classroom.

Second, when your instructor posts topical questions to a discussion board, take your time to craft an informed, well-reasoned, and well-written response.

EMAIL NETIQUETTE

When it comes to taking an online class, email netiquette is particularly important.

Here's your challenge: based on the tips we've covered, help Brittany compose an email to her history professor asking when the midterm will take place. At each step, you'll be presented with two choices of sentences or phrases—simply select the choice you think is best.

The salutation.

- a. "Dear Professor Kennedy,"
- b. "Hi,"

Correct answer: A. When addressing your teacher, include a title such as “Professor” or “Instructor,” unless they ask you to address them otherwise. If you’re unsure of your instructor’s title, you can simply ask your teacher in a preliminary email.

The question/concern.

- a. “do u kno when the midterm will b? thx”
- b. “I hope you’re well. I was wondering: do we have a date set for the midterm?”

Correct answer: B. Even though it might be a convenient shortcut for texting or Instant Messaging with your friends, don’t write email or a private message to your instructor or others in text speak. Punctuate your message correctly, check your spelling carefully, and begin the first word of each sentence with a capital letter. Showcase your brilliance!

The wrap-up and sign-off.

- a. “Thank you so much for your help! Sincerely, Brittany.”
- b. “THANKS YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR HELP! SINCERELY BRITTANY.”

Correct answer: A. Don’t use all capital letters for certain words or phrases in emails or private messages. Readers often interpret emails written in all caps as if the writer is yelling at them.

Great job, and thanks for getting Brittany off on the right track with her instructor! Before you go, we want to leave you with one final, feline acronym that will help you remember three important aspects of email etiquette: **RAR!**

R: Respond. Reply to emails and private messages in a timely manner; don’t let more than two days elapse before replying to your instructor or another student.

A: Attach. If you’ve included an attachment with your email, mention it in the body of the email. Then double-check that you actually included the attachment before you hit “send.”

R: Re-read. This goes for emails, as well as any other written text you submit in your course. One of the biggest advantages of taking an online class is that you can really take your time to think about and formulate your responses before you deliver them.

Conclusion

You’re now ready to take on any online communication challenges you may encounter in your course. Congratulations on learning about Communication Skills for Remote Learners and don’t forget to RAR!

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