

Online Real-time Chats

Synchronous (real-time) chats provide you with one of the few online course experiences where you can receive immediate replies to your questions or comments, thus allowing for a conversation to develop quickly with your instructor or classmates. You will want to use these unique opportunities in a manner that takes advantage of real-time technology.

1. Prepare a list of questions that you would like to ask and to have answered during the chat. Write the questions in a document that you can cut-and-paste from during the discussion. For long questions this will save you the time of typing and editing the question before posting it to the chat. This technique will also help you avoid grammatical and spelling errors.
2. Visit the chat area at least one day before the real-time chat to make sure that you have access and adequate bandwidth for participating. If you do not have access, this will give you time to contact technical support. Also, many training Websites have multiple chat areas, so you will want to confirm that you are accessing the correct one.
3. Create a good study environment for the chat (for example, turn off the television, ask your family or co-workers not to interrupt you, turn off any instant messaging programs, turn off your email, etc.)
4. Review any rules, agenda, and/or etiquette guides provided by the instructor or host for the chat. If you are going to lead a real-time chat, then develop an agenda and set of rules for the chat. These should be shared with the other chat members prior to the chat session.
5. Not every comment or question posted by other students in the discussion requires your response. Respond only to those that address you specifically or those for which your response will make a valuable contribution to the discussion. This will also help to keep the conversation focused on the topic.
6. Improve your comprehension by being an active participant in the discussions. Attempt to find the right balance between joining in conversations and dominating them.

Online Discussion Boards

Asynchronous discussions (normally in online bulletin or discussion boards) offer the opportunity to carry on a conversation with your fellow e-Learners and instructors at times convenient to you. Since each participant in the discussion can choose when to reply to the latest addition to the conversation, the flexibility in pace and length of the conversation can vary greatly. You can, however, use this additional time for clarifying your comments or elaborating on questions and thus reduce the chances that miscommunication occurs.

1. Determine the instructor expectations for the conversation and your postings. Informal postings (like those that you would write to a friend) are common, but most often the clarity and precision of formal communications will be desired for online training. Identify any model postings that an instructor may have provided to illustrate the desired level and types of participation.

2. Schedule times each day (or week depending on the length of the online training) for participating in online discussions. Include in this schedule how much time you will spend reading the postings of others as well as time for responding to postings with your comments or questions.
3. Usually you will want to write one or two well-thought-out paragraphs in a single posting to an online discussion board. Despite the fact that these paragraphs should have an introduction, supporting facts, and conclusion as used in any well-structured writing, online discussion postings are typically short. Normally you will want to limit your postings to between 4 and 6 sentences in each of one or two paragraphs.
4. Try not to read too much into statements made by others students or take comments too personally. Miscommunication is common in online discussions since many of the typical non-verbal communication tools (such as eye contact, body gestures, etc.) are not available. Avoid the use of sarcasm, idioms, jargon, slang or other communication techniques that can easily result in misunderstandings.
5. Typically you will want to cut-and-paste links to website addresses (URLs) into your postings instead of typing them into your browser. This will reduce a number of problems involving transposed letters or missing periods in links.

Email

Email is certainly the most common online communication tools used in business. Despite the fact that you likely have a great deal of experience using email to communicate with friends, colleagues, and family, the unique aspects of using email in training courses should not be overlooked. Avoiding miscommunication and developing positive online relationships through email commonly requires that you pay additional attention before pressing the “send” button.

1. Prior to sending email messages, carefully proofread the message looking for misspelled words and grammar errors. For important emails ask a co-worker, fellow student in the course, or friend to review the message first.
2. In order for the recipient to open a file that you have attached to an email they must have a software application affiliated with the file (for example, the recipient must have Microsoft Word or a compatible application in order to view an attachment that you have created in Microsoft Word). Consequently, you should verify that the recipient has the necessary software before sending a file (many software providers also offer “viewers” that can be downloaded from their Website).
3. It is good online etiquette to ask before sending emails with large file attachments since they may require the recipient to have substantial server space. If you have numerous large attachments, include those with separate emails.
4. Always review the To:, Cc:, and Bcc: fields prior to sending any email. Often, in a hurry to complete our training, we will mistakenly add (or omit) a recipient to (or from) an email message. This can be both embarrassing and potentially destructive to the online relationships you have built (such as when

an email to another student in the training course goes to the instructor, or vice versa).

5. If you are forwarding an email messages that contains within the body of the email the names and email addresses of multiple recipients who also received the original email, take the time to remove those before forwarding the message.

Online Readings

While the typical training experience will introduce you to a variety of technologies (e.g., real-time chat, asynchronous discussion boards, online video, etc.), you will still need to be a proficient and effective reader to find success in most training courses. Increasing your comprehension when reading online materials is crucial to your success in any e-Learning experience.

1. Identify the purpose of the online reading. Are you doing so for knowledge and comprehension, critical evaluation, or practical application? Knowing why you are reading will help you establish the correct skills and pace for gaining the most from the reading.
2. Preview the entire piece before starting the detailed reading. Take a few minutes to “skim” through the introduction, headings, tables, and summary before beginning.
3. Become an active reader, asking questions and taking notes as you go through the materials.
4. When reading from a computer monitor take breaks at least every 30 minutes to rest your eyes. Computer monitors can be especially tiring on your eyes when lighting is poor.

Readings

Watkins, R. and Corry, M. (2007). *E-learning Companion: A Student's Guide to Online Success*. 2nd Edition. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Watkins, R. (2004). 20 Essential Study Tips for E-learners. In Biech, E. (Ed.) *The 2004 Pfeiffer Annual: Training*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass-Pfeiffer.

Author Bio

Ryan Watkins is an associate professor at the George Washington University in Washington DC. He is the author of several best-selling books and more than 60 articles on eLearning, eLearner success, and related topics. His approach to preparing eLearners for online success has been featured on National Public Radio, ABC, and CNN. Most recently he has teamed up with How2eLearn.com to create dynamic online courses and tutorials to assist students in developing the necessary skills for a successful eLearning experience.