

Online Degrees



Staying On Task

How to reduce distractions while your online class is in session

By Kara Wahlgren

Online learning may be ideal for your busy schedule -- but your busy schedule isn't always ideal for online learning. Family members compete for your attention, new e-mails pop up in your inbox, and your growing to-do list beckons.

So when the "classroom" also happens to be your kitchen (or the kids' playroom or the family room), how do you tune out distractions?

Stick to a schedule

In a traditional class setting, you know exactly which hours you'll spend in a lecture each week. Without that rigid schedule, it's imperative that online learners establish a fairly consistent timetable for coursework.

"Plan it like work. Make it non-negotiable time," says Richard Brungard, advising program coordinator for Penn State World Campus. He suggests marking study times and assignment due dates on a calendar and hanging it in the kitchen where family members can see it.

That worked for Judy Capritti, a mother of two who took courses online through Burlington County College (BCC) in Pemberton, N.J. "I told people my 'schedule' as if I was actually at school, so they wouldn't be tempted to disturb me during that period of time," she says.

Establish a workspace

There's an old saying: "Luck is where preparation meets opportunity." Your schedule may be unpredictable, but if you're prepared to work when the opportunity presents itself, you'll have better luck in your online courses.

"It's critical to have a place where you do your work," says Donald DeVito, campus director at Rasmussen College Online [an MSN Encarta advertiser]. "Even if your house doesn't have an office, there needs to be a place that is 'school.'"

For example, if your classroom is the dining room table, DeVito recommends buying a file box where you can store textbooks, school supplies and a hanging folder for each course inside. If you have everything you need at hand, you'll be less likely to get sidetracked.

Donna Tootell, an online student at BCC, says, "Being organized is essential -- you don't have to waste time looking for things or figuring out what you need to be doing."

While you're setting up your workspace, DeVito says, "Don't make your 'school' within eyeshot or earshot of distractions, or where other people in the house are going to want to congregate."

If your only available space is in the middle of the family rec room, and you can't resist the urge to check the 12 o'clock news or tidy up the kids' toys, you may want to move your workspace to a nearby coffee shop or library.

Foresee (and fend off) distractions

You wouldn't stock up on cookies if you were about to start a diet, so don't clutter your at-home classroom with temptation.

"That's where discipline comes into play," DeVito says. "Sometimes you just have to turn off the television, put the iPod in a drawer and turn off your cell phone."

You probably already know what (or who) is most likely to lure you from your schoolwork, so take steps to preclude those interruptions before they interfere. Capritti, for example, made a habit of calling her daughter and father before studying: "That way, if the phone did ring, I wasn't overly concerned about who it might be." Another BCC student who's taken several online courses disabled his Facebook account because it was an easy tool for procrastination.

Distractions are a way of life -- it's hard to ignore those unfinished projects, that pile of laundry or the season finale of your favorite show.

"You can't avoid distractions, but you can take control of the situation," Brungard says. By committing time, space and a little bit of forethought to your online education, you'll be more able to stay focused.