Organizing for Online Success

Introduction

Online versus on campus gas a few differences…

If you're taking a course on campus, you'll meet with your instructor and the other students in your class at least once a week. In this traditional environment, you will be reminded multiple times when assignments are due. In an online environment, however, it's up to you to remind yourself. Luckily, there are a lot of tools out there to help you get started. But first it's important to get organized. Getting your physical study space organized, organize your course materials, and develop a scheduling system that will help you turn all your coursework in on time.

Organize Your Environment

So, what does it take to be organized? Take control of your physical space. When are you most productive? In what kind of set-up? Everyone's preferences will be different, but once you've answered these questions for yourself, create a place where your priority can be concentrating on schoolwork. First, identify what time of day you are most productive. Are you most alert and fresh in the morning? Do you prefer to work at night, when you've gotten other things you need to accomplish during the day already done? Or is there some other time of day that works best for your studies? It can really help to set up a schedule, so you know when you will be sitting down to accomplish the requirements for your course. Second, decide where to study. Some people prefer to work at home; others find that setting too tempting or distracting. Some prefer the quiet of a library while others appreciate the background activity they find at a café. Make sure you have a plan B location in case your first location doesn't work out on a given day. Maybe someone in your home is having company over, or there isn't any more seating available at Starbucks. But at the end of the day, it's like the ancient Greek saying goes: "Know thyself." Third, what conditions will enable you to concentrate and learn most effectively within your study space? Your motivation can be influenced by the noise level, temperature, and light in the place you choose. So, bring a sweater... Pack some headphones, or do anything else that will allow you to tailor your environment to your personal preferences. Once you find what works best for you, you can make the adjustments you need to be comfortable and get to work!

Know your constraints.

Is your employer okay with you studying at work during lunch and on breaks? Can you use your work computer for your classes? Ask, don't assume. You don't want to step on your employer's toes or paint yourself into a corner with your schoolwork by presuming that it's fine with them.

Know where you can plug in. Identify several places with free wireless Internet. That way, if one network is down, you will have an alternative location for getting assignments in on time. This

doesn't only go for wireless either. Electrical outlets can become hot real estate if others have the same idea as you. If you're planning to be at a given location for a long time, be aware of the availability of electrical outlets. The last thing you want is for your device to die in the middle of a study session or while you are working on an assignment.

Organize Your Course Materials

The second element you will have to organize is your course materials. You may prefer working with hard copies that you can print out and write on, or you may appreciate the ease and flexibility that comes with working digitally. Most students use a combination of both, depending on the course or a given assignment. But both require you to set up a reliable and convenient system so you can stay on top of your work.

If you like to work with "hard" (or physical, printed) copies, find a place where you can keep all your school materials: books, notes, assignments, binders, and a calendar. Keep a stash of basic office supplies: pens, highlighters, paper, a stapler, binders, folders, index cards or any other study aids you might need.

Create an Organizational Style

Create an organizational style that works for you. The internet can be helpful here. A quick Google search or a few minutes on a visual bookmark site like Pinterest might give you some helpful tips and ideas that could make a practical task like organizing exciting and enjoyable. If, on the other hand, you prefer the ease and convenience that comes with an electronic or digital system, you still have many options for how to organize your materials. Again, you'll still want to have a "place" where you can store and find your materials. Which device will you keep your materials on? Where will you store your backups? If you're saving your files on different devices, you may find yourself wasting a lot of time trying to locate a particular document. Avoid this by creating an electronic organizational system that works well for you. You may want to store files on your own personal computer, or you may want to take advantage of publicly available computers and store your work on a removable hard drive.
Any of these hardware options (or combinations of them) should work just fine. Another option is to keep your files in the "cloud," or in online storage. This may mean emailing yourself copies of assignments or tapping into the free resources offered by cloud-based services here at ECC, like OneDrive. If your files are saved in the cloud, you will be able to access them from anywhere, **if** you have access to the Internet. Some examples of cloud-based storage services include: OneDrive, Dropbox, Amazon CloudDrive, Google Drive, Evernote.

You'll want to check cloud-services websites for their latest information on their capacity (how much space they'll give you for free), compatibility (what browsers they support best),do they have an app? (Which one offers the services you'd value the most for your schoolwork). Shop around— not all services are created equal!

Decide how to organize your electronic course materials, including those you download and those you create. For example, you might create: One folder for each of your courses; One sub-folder for each week of each course, using a naming convention that includes the dates of each week. For example, Wk1_Sept01-08. Within each weekly sub-folders, you could create another level of sub-folders divided into "readings," "resources," "assignments," etc.

Create descriptive file names so you don't have to open files to know what is in it: for example, the course title and assignment name.

Develop a version control system for when you go back and revise a file you already saved. Some people use v1, v2, while others use the date.

Keep at least one backup for each of your files and store them in a different place than where you usually access them. So, if you save your files on your personal laptop, save them also in the cloud or on an external hard drive. That way, if - knock on wood - your computer crashes, you won't lose all your work.

Organize Your Time

The last thing you'll need to organize is your time. The first thing you'll want to do when you sign up for an online class is to read the syllabus - thoroughly! - and familiarize yourself with class requirements and assignment due dates. Write these down immediately. It will help you get an idea of what the rest of the term will look like and how the course will be paced. Above all, it will make sure that you don't have any surprises midway through the term. You won't want to realize that your first big essay is due the day before the midterm, when it's too late to get either assignment done well.

Create a calendar

Create a calendar that you can fill out as soon as you receive the syllabus and that you can update and consult periodically throughout the semester. You might want to use Google calendar, the calendar in Canvas, Outlook's calendar or another cloud-based system that you can check from any device and set up with notifications for when assignments are due, or you might find that the system that works best for you is an old-fashioned day planner or wall calendar.

Break it up!
If you prefer to break an assignment into manageable pieces and schedule them accordingly, do so. This can be tremendously helpful because it will give you milestones that will allow you to monitor your progress incrementally.

Use an alert/alarm

Use a reminder or alert feature built into an online calendar to keep yourself on track.

Now that you have some tips to get started, you should be well on your way for organizational success! Because online learning is so flexible, you can really tailor the experience to your own personal preferences. Simply find what works and stick to it. And remember, The Learning Center is always here to help you along the way. Come by, call (636-584-6688) or email (general_tutoring@eastcentral.edu)