Communication Skills for Online Learning (Text Version)

- Good Communication
- Definitions
- Discussion Boards
- Video Conferencing
- Netiquette
- Student Q & A
- Conclusion

Good Communication

Good communication skills are essential in your online course. There are many different ways you'll communicate with your instructor and other students in your class, so we've created this module to introduce you to common terms you'll need to know and familiarize you with some concepts that we hope will lead you to success in your class.

Our job in this module is to teach you:

- the vocabulary that may be used to describe communication in your online class,
- how communication is different for you as a student when you're learning online,
- some of the advantages and disadvantages of academic online communication, and
- how to become an effective communicator in your online course.

Definitions

Let's begin with a few definitions.

First let's talk about the two types of communication that can be used in an online class:

- **Asynchronous communication** is when you, your classmates, and your instructor participate in online discussions at different times, rather than in real time. So if you send your instructor a question via email, participate in an online discussion forum, or post to a blog for your class, you are communicating asynchronously.

- **Synchronous communication** happens in real time, like having a class discussion in a traditional setting or talking to a teacher after class. But you can communicate synchronously in an online environment too, through the use of tools like online chat;
Internet voice of video calling systems like Skype or Google Hang-outs; or through the use of web-based video conferencing software like WebEx, Zoom, or Collaborate.

Discussion Boards

The **discussion board** (also known as a discussion forum, or message board) is one of the most popular features in a Course Management System, and it's one place where your asynchronous classroom discussions can occur. Your instructor may post the first message (or prompt) and ask students to reply to their initial post, or they may choose to allow students to post a topic (or thread) and engage the class in the online conversation that way. Both methods are equally effective, and discussions in your online courses are likely to vary, just like your discussions in a traditional class can differ depending on your instructor and their personal teaching style.

Video Conferencing

**Video Conferencing** software applications like Zoom, Collaborate, or WebEx are designed to support larger groups than Skype. They can provide a virtual experience that closely replicates an on-campus classroom. Many videoconferencing applications include useful features like:

- the ability to share desktops,
- the ability to share files
- online chat windows
- break-out rooms for small group work

So your computer can truly become a window into a live classroom where students and instructors can interact and collaborate at the same time.

Netiquette

Finally, "**netiquette**", which 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 synchronous and asynchronous communication. Netiquette includes respectful behavior, appropriate language, and an acknowledgement of other people's privacy interests. Remember, your classroom discussions should be much more formal than the type of discussions you may have with your friends on Facebook or Twitter.

Student Q&A

Now that we've covered some of the basic terminology, let's start digging a little deeper into these topics. Here are some typical questions that students have about communicating online.

**Student 1:** Ok, so you've told us about the differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication. But what does this mean for me?

Online class communication often takes place asynchronously rather than in real time, giving
you a chance to research, write, and edit your answers, instead of being put "on the spot" during class. Think of this as an opportunity for you to really reflect and compose your thoughts carefully before you make a response.

Synchronous sessions are similar to what you experience in your traditional classes. Discussions can often be more lively this way, because interactions are immediate since everyone is in the virtual room at the same time. They can also help an online class bond more quickly, if used early in the semester.

**Student 2:** Will my online communications be permanent?

Yes--when you communicate asynchronously online, you create a permanent record of your words. All of your electronic communication will be dated, and because of this it 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 3:** I generally feel more comfortable talking online than in person. Is online communication easier than face-to-face communication in a classroom, too?

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 students find that this environment gives them extra confidence if they are normally shy or tongue-tied in front of instructors or other students.

**Student 4:** This isn't really a question, but more of a concern. I'm worried that there will be more potential for misunderstanding when I'm communicating online than when I'm communicating face-to-face.

This is a valid concern, because the teacher and your classmates cannot see your body language or hear your voice, written words can sometimes be misinterpreted. Review your written communications in an online course carefully before posting and try to remove any language that could be interpreted as offensive or inappropriate.

**RAR**

Before you leave we want to leave you with one final, feline acronym that will help you remember 3 important aspects of email etiquette: RAR!

**R:** Respond. Respond to email 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

Congratulations on finishing the Online Communication Skills module, and don't forget to RAR!

Creative Commons License Info:

© 2016 Chancellor's Office, California Community Colleges
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. They are available to everyone and may be repurposed to meet the unique needs of educational institutions.

Modified for brevity by Aims Community College, June 2020