

Sierra College
Bio. Sci. 10 - Introduction to Biology
Jim Wilson, Instructor

ARE YOU CERTAIN THAT YOU ARE READY FOR AN ONLINE CLASS?

Questions to Ask Yourself Before Taking Biology Online

Online classes may be either more difficult or easier for you depending on your learning styles, personality, motivations and other commitments.

Not every student can effectively take advantage of the freedom and responsibility associated with learning within an online environment. Most of us, including your instructor, would find learning easier in a supportive classroom environment with face-to-face encouragement, immediate instructional feedback, personal interactions, and group energy. Yet for many, the online option fits well and provides an alternative that, due to other factors, is the best educational fit. Compared to a standard classroom situation in which everyone is in the same room, at the same time, doing the same work; the online classroom has less direct contact and less immediate access to your instructor and less direct interaction with your fellow students. To achieve success in an online class, you must be significantly more self-motivated, assertive, and skilled in your ability to find your own answers and to study on your own. To a large extent, you must be able to generate your own enthusiasm and excitement about learning the material made available, especially when people around you (at home or elsewhere) are all doing something else. This is not to discourage you from attending, but only to raise your awareness of the potential personal challenges, which may be associated with successful online learning.

IS INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM TO STUDY ON YOUR OWN, BENEFICIAL?

Online classes offer students an alternative method for completing their educational requirements while maintaining busy work schedules and meeting your other obligations. However, the freedom from immediate deadlines and the more flexible "work-at-your-own-pace" schedule of this class requires that you be more disciplined and more accurate budgeting your time. It will take time for you to read and fully understand the information provided, write out questions for your instructor, and complete other online tasks. If your learning style is predominately verbal, you may find the online class particularly challenging, but not impossible. Science courses typically include large quantities of new information, and this will be too much to learn at the last minute, before some rapidly approaching deadline. It is essential and your responsibility to you keep up with the class assignments and to fully participate in all activities. The ability to communicate by email and other Internet related methods allows you freedom to work whenever it is best for you. However, when you are working at your computer sending out your questions, discussion comments and/or assignments, other people including your instructor may be "elsewhere" at the moment, doing other important things. The same "independence" that works

for you while planning your study time may seem to work against you when you are seeking immediate feedback. Recognize that you must be more "proactive" in seeking out positive interactions with your fellow students and with your instructor(s) if you want to become involved in "class".

WHAT IS THE TIME COMMITMENT REQUIRED FOR THIS CLASS?

Factors such as educational experience, existing knowledge of the subject material, study skills, learning and social styles, and personal living situations (to name a few) can effectively increase or decrease the time you will need to set aside in order to succeed in this course. Let's look at how much time you should have available for reading, studying, testing, completing laboratory exercises and projects, participating in discussions, etc. Keep in mind that this is only an estimate. One standard estimate of time required for any college level class is two hours at home for every hour in the classroom. For Bio. Sci. 10, which normally includes three hours of lecture time each week, conscientious students would want to dedicate 6 hours per week (on the average) to the study of biology in order to do well. In this online class, you will need time to read lectures or text materials, to search the internet for additional information, to study and learn the subject material, to participate in the online discussions, to take any quizzes and tests, to keep track of and complete online assignments and activities, to communicate with other students in the class, and to ask questions as necessary. Most of you will be scheduling this class around our work, our family obligations and other activities, almost taking this class "on our own" with limited support from friends and family. For your educational goals, you need to self-assign biology as a high priority, enough to insure success. You may find this is not easy to do depending on the other "distractions" in your life, but hopefully, the flexibility of the online teaching format may actually help.

Students enrolled in an online course must be more aware of and sensitive to assignment deadlines and more willing to push themselves to keep a reasonable and productive pace throughout the semester than their on-campus counterparts. One reason for this is that online discussions (etc.) will require significantly more time than verbal (in-the-same-room) discussions. It may take as much as a day or more between posting a question and receiving a reply via a discussion board or email. Although chat room discussions would be faster, they are difficult to schedule, and are usually not convenient for the typical online student. If you are familiar with the Internet and its resources, many of your questions may be answered by yourself if you can use the Internet as a resource tool.

Some serious words of advice for students seeking success in an online class are: "DO NOT procrastinate!"

HOW IMPORTANT ARE READING SKILLS?

Most classes held on campus rely heavily on verbal communication for providing directions, asking questions and presenting new information (lecture and laboratory). Students can sometimes get by with just skimming over lecture and laboratory reading assignments and

relying on the help of fellow students for completing assignments. During online instruction, the most common form of communication will be written, and the importance of good reading habits cannot be underestimated. Although discussion boards and email communications represent advances in technology, they are not as quick and easy as verbal communication between an instructor and his/her students. Consequently, reading and understanding written material (online directions and assignments) is essential. DO NOT permit yourself to skim read online information! Reading has its advantages, but it takes time to read accurately, and accuracy is essential to success.

HOW IMPORTANT IS COMPUTER LITERACY TO SUCCESS IN AN ONLINE CLASS?

Computers have become important tools in nearly all classes; however, for most on-campus classes, they are still more a convenience than a requirement. For online courses, this is obviously not the case. Instructors providing online courses assume that their students are computer literate. This generally means that they expect students to be acquainted with various standard software packages and their operation, that they be able to load new programs if necessary, establish and maintain Internet connections, and handle various hardware needs as they arise. Since all Sierra College Online courses are Web-based, access to a computer with an Internet connection and Web browser is required. In addition, much of the lecture material made available with this course will be provided via Microsoft Word documents, so having this software will be advantageous. If you cannot access Microsoft Word documents, you may contact the instructor for a text alternative. As a student, you must NOT expect your instructor to extend due dates because of problems you are having with your computer or software. If you need help, contact your instructor, not to fix your computer, but to suggest temporary alternatives as necessary.

IS GROUP COMMUNICATION NECESSARY?

Since online classes lack the opportunity for verbal interactions between students and their instructor, online "discussion" is often accomplished through discussion boards, email, and (possibly) chat rooms. For an optimal online experience, students should become comfortable using various forms of cyber-communications and should be aware of accepted standards in "netiquette". There is a direct correlation between a student's success in an online course and that student's timely participation in cyber-communications. Therefore, the points assigned for discussions will have timely deadlines. DO NOT underestimate the importance of contributing to online discussions. For a hybrid class, group communications are greatly enhanced by participating together during the scheduled in-class sessions. Group activities will be required during these laboratory sessions and will have significant point values.

If you have any questions or concerns about these online concepts, please do not hesitate to contact your instructor. Just because you are enrolled in an online class, don't assume you can't call the instructor by phone or meet directly with him/her to talk.

NOTE – If you feel this introductory information is excessive and find reading such a lengthy document to be fatiguing, you should think twice about taking an online class.