



E-learning 101

A Practical Manual for
New Online Students

The legal stuff

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Introduction

How this manual will help you

At first glance, e-learning seems like a bit of a beast. It looks pretty wild, and maybe even dangerous. No wonder you're a little nervous.

In reality, e-learning's not quite so scary. With the right approach, it can be tamed.

If you're an adult learner who's new to online learning, this guide's for you.

We have one main goal here...

To take the worry out of e-learning.

The best way to do that is to give you simple and clear information which answers your most pressing questions.

So this guide contains the core information you need for e-learning success.

And that's all.

There are plenty of books out there which cover the A-Z of e-learning – from how to choose the right course, to job-hunting strategies when you finish.

You won't find any of that here. **E-learning 101** simply covers the basics. You can worry about the A-Z of e-learning later (if ever).

And because this is an electronic guide, you don't have to wait weeks for it to arrive on your doorstep. You can stop feeling stressed today.



How to read & apply the lessons

The solutions you're about to learn can be used straight away.

We'll cover the 6 areas adult learners struggle with most. Each lesson begins by briefly explaining the nature of a particular problem. I'll then walk you through a 4 step process for solving it.

This is not a textbook. There's no passive reading here – in each lesson, you'll have the chance to apply the strategies to your own situation with Action Steps. The Action Steps will help you to tackle your problems right away – before they get any bigger.

You can note down your answers with a pen and paper as you read, or you can print out this guide, and fill them in as you go.



Important

Each lesson offers a self-contained solution.

Feel free to skip ahead to your most urgent challenge, and start there.

OK, enough background – let's get started!

Lesson 1 Who's afraid of technology?

Technology plays a starring role in e-learning. There's no getting away from it.

For many adult learners, this is a massive potential problem. It's a major source of fear. Not everyone grew up with iPhones, Facebook, and Twitter. Plenty of people have never spent days at a time inside World of Warcraft.

And even if you *do* have lots of technology experience, the idea of dealing with an online learning system can still be pretty daunting.

Putting learning technology in its place

There's something you should know about e-learning technology. Don't worry, it's very good news.



E-learning technology is almost always simpler than it looks.

That shouldn't be so surprising, if you think about it.

After all, the goal of e-learning is to teach you something new. Much of the time, you'll be learning independently. So the system needs to be fairly self-explanatory and easy to use.

You'll be using a type of Learning Management System to learn online. A well-designed one does three things.

It will:

1. Give you access to learning materials
2. Present the materials in an engaging way, and
3. Get out of your way, and let you learn.

E-learning technology's simply a tool that helps you to learn. It's not artificially intelligent. It's not a cyborg terminator from the future. It's not out to get you.

It's just a learning tool. There's nothing very dramatic about it.

Let's talk about some ways to keep e-learning technology in its place.

How to get over your fear of learning technology

Step 1: Get to know the system

This is the fundamental first step that most learners never take. But if you invest some time early on in understanding the basics, you'll reduce your technology-based stress by 90%.

Maybe more.

You don't have to set aside entire days, or have a background in Information Technology. You just need to learn how to drive the system in a functional way.

Think of it as a car with very, very simple controls. How do you make it stop and go, and then move forward and backwards? (Leave the reverse parallel parking, and other hard stuff, right out of it.)

You may be using Blackboard, or Moodle, or a custom built platform. It doesn't matter which Learning Management System you're using, really, because many of the principles are the same.

You'll need to find your way through different parts of the course, much like you'd use the menu of a website. Spend a little time exploring what's under each link, section or tab. That way, you'll know where to find all the information you need – well before you need it.



Take action!

Invest some time now in exploring your Learning Management System.

If it's too overwhelming, schedule 3 or 4 blocks of 15 minutes at a time, and then take a break. You don't need to learn it all at once.

Look around, and make sure you can access the key parts of your course. Check to see that you can:

- Log in to your course
- Locate the course materials and readings
- Find the assessments, and due dates, and
- Get to the discussion boards

Not so difficult, is it?

Step 2: Try the online tutorials

Now you know the basic parts of the Learning Management System, you'll be feeling a little more confident. You're ready to take the quick guided tour.

Many Learning Management Systems have built-in help for new learners. These are short, very visual tutorials on how to get the most from the system. They're like a quick guided tour. They won't drown you in information you don't need.

But they just may address many of your fears, and answer your most stomach-churning questions.

After all, they're designed to help people in exactly your position.



Take action!

Which two activities have you been worrying about the most?

How to submit assignments? How to post in online discussion boards?

Watch a couple of tutorials and put your fears to rest. Remember to turn the sound on your computer on, in case the instructions are verbal.

Worrying Activity 1 _____

Watch the tutorial

Can you do it now? _____

Worrying Activity 2 _____

Watch the tutorial

Can you do it now? _____

And remember: if you don't get it the first time, just watch the tutorial again. Who will know?

Step 3: Understand that technology can actually make things easier!

Believe it or not, e-learning technology can really enrich the learning experience. Studying is no longer just about wading through chapter after chapter in a thick textbook. You suddenly have a lot more options.

Many online courses include a range of learning materials which appeal to different kinds of learners.

You may come across many different resources, like:

- interactive quizzes
- links to blogs or online articles
- online activities
- photos, movies or short clips, or
- recorded guest lectures.

E-learning technology opens up entirely new ways of accessing information. It *is* on your side, after all...



Take action!

Make a point of trying out the different kinds of resources you find in your course. Click on that recommended link to YouTube and see what you find. Visit a helpful website or follow a link to a forum where like-minded people are talking about the topic you're studying.

Be open to the idea that e-learning technology might just surprise you – and enhance the learning process, by making it more engaging and interactive.

Step 4: What if there's a problem?

As with all kinds of technology, sometimes there'll be glitches with the system.

One day you won't be able to log in, or a key resource just won't download. Your student email account might have locked you out, or your last discussion posting will have mysteriously disappeared.

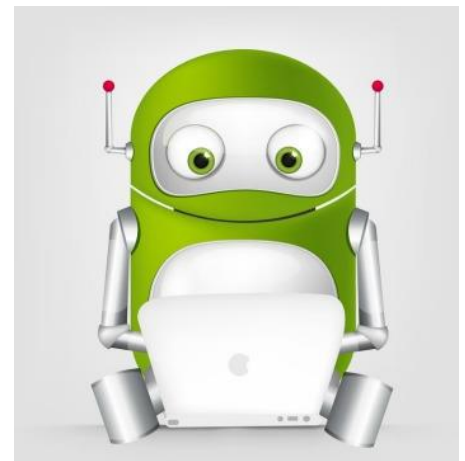
When you encounter a technology glitch, there's only one golden rule.

Never panic. Ever.

These are technical issues, not Armageddon. This is what Help Desks are for.

Go to your learning organisation's home page, and find the Help Desk contact. Send them an email or phone them, making sure that you explain your problem clearly and calmly. They deal with these issues all the time.

They'll know how to fix the problem, because that's what they do.



If the technical glitch means you'll miss a deadline, contact your tutor and let them know the situation. Often, they'll be sympathetic and will appreciate being kept in the loop. They may offer an extension on your assignment, or some other helpful advice.

You're not alone – ask for help!



Take action!

If you're worrying about potential attacks from technical gremlins now, take a moment to track down the Help Desk contact phone number and email.

If and when you face a problem with technology down the track, you'll remember not to panic, and simply call in an expert to help you.

Help Desk phone number: _____

Help Desk email: _____



What to take out of this lesson

The key points are:

1. E-learning technology is not a robot sent back from the future to kill you. It's a learning tool which is designed to help you get more out of your course.
2. If you spend some time learning the basics of the Learning Management System, you'll be a lot calmer, and better prepared. The earlier you do this, the better.
3. Technology can make learning more engaging, relevant, easier to understand – and even fun!
4. If you get stuck, help is only a phone call or email away. Always ask for help.

Lesson 2 Too busy to study?

If you're juggling a job, family commitments and any kind of social life, you're already busy. Add an online course to the mix, and your schedule will be straining at the seams.

So it's worth asking...

Is e-learning actually faster than traditional learning?

Well, in some ways, yes. It's true that you can study after work or when the kids are in bed, in your own time. So online learning's flexible (which is great).



But people often confuse **flexible** learning with **faster** learning. Yes, you can choose when and where you study. You don't have to physically get to a campus.

But flexible learning doesn't mean instant learning. *All* kinds of study involve a time investment.

You'll still need to:

- Work through the course material
- Do further reading for assignments
- Prepare assignments, and submit them by deadlines
- Communicate with your online tutor
- Participate in online activities with your fellow learners, and
- Allow time for the new ideas and knowledge to "sink in".

It will still take some time to work through all the parts of the learning process itself.

But that's OK.

At this point, you're already ahead. You've found out early on that you'll have to find a way to carve out some time to study.

It can be done! You just need a strategy. Let's make one.

How to find time to study when you're already busy

Step 1: How much time do you need?

Start by working out how much time each of your units requires.

At the beginning of your course, you may have received an information pack. It'll probably tell you how many hours per week you should be putting in.

If you can't find this information, try the Course Outline web page. Or email your tutor, and ask how many hours of study per week are expected for each of your units.

Once you know that, you know how much time you'll need to find.

There's a big difference between finding 5 hours a week for study, for example, and 30.



Take action!

How many hours do you need per unit?

The sooner you work it out, the sooner you'll know what you're up against.

Unit 1: _____ per week

Unit 2: _____ per week

Unit 3: _____ per week

Unit 4: _____ per week

Step 2: Where does the time go?

How do you spend your time now? Where does it go? Most people never think about it. Suddenly, it's Friday afternoon and your To Do list is still 3 pages long.

But it's easy to work out where your time goes. Let's look at how a typical day's schedule might look.

Monday

7.00am-8.30am	Get kids ready for school, have breakfast
8.30am-9.00am	Get to work
9.00am-12.00pm	Work!
12.00pm-1.00pm	Lunch
1.00pm-5.00pm	More work
5.00pm-5.30pm	Get home
5.30pm-7.30pm	Dinner, family time
7.30pm-8.30pm	Wash dishes, get ready for next day
8.30pm-11.00pm	Watch TV, chat on the phone, browse the internet, spend time with partner
11.00pm-7.00am	Collapse and sleep!

Does this look a little like your working week? If you work part-time, or have other commitments, you'll spend your time differently.

What about the weekend? That counts, too. What does your typical weekend day look like? It might go something like this.

Saturday

7.00am-8.30am	Stay in bed!
8.30am-10.00am	Take the kids to sports
10.00am-12.00pm	Buy groceries for the coming week

12.00pm-2.00pm	Meet friends or family for lunch
2.00pm-4.00pm	Walk the dog or have coffee with a friend
4.00pm-6.00pm	No set plans
6.00pm-8.00pm	Have dinner; talk to the family
8.00pm-11.00pm	Go out

You get the idea...

Your schedule will reflect your own lifestyle. Measure how you spend your time, and you may be very surprised by what you discover.



Take action!

Before you go any further, sketch out where your time goes in an average week. Don't get too bogged down with the details; just plot out what you would normally do for each slot.

Monday

7.00am-8.30am	_____
8.30am-9.00am	_____
9.00am-12.00pm	_____
12.00pm-1.00pm	_____
1.00pm-5.00pm	_____
5.00pm-5.30pm	_____

5.30pm-7.30pm

7.30pm-8.30pm

8.30pm-11.00pm

11.00pm-7.00am

Tuesday

7.00am-8.30am

8.30am-9.00am

9.00am-12.00pm

12.00pm-1.00pm

1.00pm-5.00pm

5.00pm-5.30pm

5.30pm-7.30pm

7.30pm-8.30pm

8.30pm-11.00pm

11.00pm-7.00am

Wednesday

7.00am-8.30am

8.30am-9.00am

9.00am-12.00pm

12.00pm-1.00pm

1.00pm-5.00pm

5.00pm-5.30pm

5.30pm-7.30pm

7.30pm-8.30pm

8.30pm-11.00pm

11.00pm-7.00am

Thursday

7.00am-8.30am

8.30am-9.00am

9.00am-12.00pm

12.00pm-1.00pm

1.00pm-5.00pm

5.00pm-5.30pm

5.30pm-7.30pm

7.30pm-8.30pm

8.30pm-11.00pm

11.00pm-7.00am

Friday

7.00am-8.30am

8.30am-9.00am

9.00am-12.00pm

12.00pm-1.00pm

1.00pm-5.00pm

5.00pm-5.30pm

5.30pm-7.30pm

7.30pm-8.30pm

8.30pm-11.00pm

11.00pm-7.00am

Saturday

7.00am-8.30am

8.30am-10.00am

10.00am-12.00pm

12.00pm-2.00pm

2.00pm-4.00pm

4.00pm-6.00pm

6.00pm-8.00pm

8.00pm-11.00pm

Sunday

7.00am-8.30am

8.30am-10.00am

10.00am-12.00pm

12.00pm-2.00pm

2.00pm-4.00pm

4.00pm-6.00pm

6.00pm-8.00pm

8.00pm-11.00pm

Well done!

At this stage, you should have 2 key pieces of information. You'll know:

1. How much time you need to find in your weekly schedule for studying, and
2. Where your time goes during a normal week.

Great! Onto the next step.

Step 3: Where are the gaps in your schedule?

Now you know more about where your week goes, you simply look for the gaps between your commitments. Believe me, they're there!

We'll use our Monday schedule as an example. Let's say you're taking one unit, and you need to find 5 hours a week for studying. Where are the gaps in the sample schedule?

Monday

7.00am-8.30am	Get kids ready for school
8.30am-9.00am	Get to work (<i>Here's a spare half hour you could use to listen to a recorded lecture, while you commute</i>)
9.00am-12.00pm	Work!
12.00pm-1.00pm	Lunch (<i>A free hour to read course material or draft up an assignment while you have a sandwich</i>)
1.00pm-5.00pm	More work
5.00pm-5.30pm	Get home (<i>Another half hour to listen to information on your iPod (or read an article if you take the train)</i>)
5.30pm-7.30pm	Dinner, family time
7.30pm-8.30pm	Wash dishes, get ready for next day
8.30pm-11.00pm	Watch TV, chat on the phone, browse the internet, spend time with partner (<i>There's at least an hour in here you could steal</i>)
11.00pm-7.00am	Collapse and sleep!

What does this mean?

It means there's 3 hours of potential study time hiding in this average working day.

If you work five days a week, that's $5 \times 3 = 15$ hours. Plenty of time! And we haven't looked for the gaps in the weekend yet.

Let's look at the Saturday example next:

Saturday

7.00am-8.30am	Stay in bed!
8.30am-10.00am	Take the kids to sports
10.00am-12.00pm	Buy groceries for the coming week
12.00pm-2.00pm	Meet friends or family for lunch
2.00pm-4.00pm	Walk the dog in park or go shopping (<i>Here's at least an hour</i>)
4.00pm-6.00pm	No set plans (<i>There's 2 hours right there</i>)
6.00pm-8.00pm	Have dinner; talk to family
8.00pm-11.00pm	Go out (<i>Or if you stay in, that's a whole evening...</i>)



So that's another 3 hours – at least. And if your Sunday looks anything like your Saturday, add another 3.

In this example, it's possible to find 15 hours during your working week, plus 6 hours on the weekend – a potential total of 21 hours!

If you were only looking to find 5 hours, that's pretty good news. It means you have plenty of flexibility, and the freedom to choose the time slots that work best for you.



Take action!

Look back at the weekly schedule you completed in Step 2.

Where are the gaps in your week? How many hours do you have for study?

Do you actually have more hours for study than you need?

You then have the luxury of choosing the time slots that will work best for you to study in.

Step 4: Add your study periods to your calendar

How do you currently keep track of your commitments? You might use a diary, a calendar on the fridge, or an online schedule. It doesn't matter which tool you use (as long as you use one of them!).

The next step is to block out your study hours in every week of your calendar until the end of the semester.

Think of these study periods as appointments to study. Keep these appointments, and it's easier to stay on top of your workload.



Take action!

Block out your study periods in your calendar, until the end of the semester.

Do it now, and you'll remember that you *do* have enough time to study – you've just proved it!

One more trick

Sometimes a Life Event will get in the way of your brilliant new time management plan. You might get some unexpected house guests, start a new job, or help a friend move house.

When this happens, simply reschedule your appointments to study. Pick another gap in your schedule, and do your work then.

When you're back in control of your time, there's nearly always enough time to study. You really don't need to give up all hope of having a life at the same time.



What to take out of this lesson

The key points are:

1. E-learning is definitely more flexible than traditional learning. But it still takes time!
2. Find out how much time each of your units requires, so you know how much time you'll need for studying.
3. Know where your time goes – then fit study periods around your existing commitments.
4. Make firm appointments with yourself to study, and write them on your calendar.

Lesson 3 How to study when you don't feel like it

In online learning, self-motivation's more powerful than being naturally brilliant, or super self-confident.

It's a skill that'll make your e-learning experience a lot smoother.

Why is self-motivation so important in e-learning?

So why does self-motivation matter so much?

It's because of the main big difference between traditional and online learning:

In e-learning, the tutor is more of a guide or mentor than a traditional teacher.

When you study online, you're working independently. You're treated as an adult. There's no-one checking to see whether you've done the homework, read Chapter 3 of the textbook, or handed in your work on time. All of this is up to you.

This means that your progress is your responsibility.

If you're the self-motivated type, this is fantastic news. It sets you free to work through a course without anyone breathing down your neck, or telling you what to do.

But if you struggle with self-motivation, this may not be such great news. You might prefer a little more guidance when you study. But that doesn't mean you won't cut it in the online environment. It simply means you'll have to develop the habits of self-motivation a little more deliberately.

That can be done, too. This lesson will show you how.



How to become more self-motivated

Step 1: What's in this for you?

There are a million ways to lose momentum. Maybe you're putting in extra hours at work, and you're pretty exhausted. The online course could be harder than you expected. Or a lot more boring. It's just so easy to turn on the TV instead of the computer.

When you just don't feel like studying, it can really help to ask yourself one simple but powerful question:

What's in this for me?

Let's get back to basics for a second.

Why are you taking your e-learning course? What will you get out of it?

When you remember your underlying motivation, it becomes easier to stay on track.

There are many potential reasons to enrol in a course. Such as:

- To prove to yourself (or someone else) that you can do it
- To learn specific skills you can use
- To get promoted, or a pay rise
- To increase your existing knowledge about a subject
- To help other people, or even
- For fun!

There are plenty more potential motivators for studying online. It's just a matter of getting back in touch with yours.



Take action!

What's in this for you?

List 3 of your reasons for enrolling in the online course.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Tape this list up next to your computer. Glance at it often to help remember why you're doing this.

Step 2: Make the learning relevant

Here's another way of increasing your levels of self-motivation. Try looking for ways to make the learning directly relevant to your life.

How is this course going to make your personal or professional life better?

How will you apply your new skills and knowledge? Which aspects of your life are going to improve as a result?

When you understand the **relevance** of your online course, it's easier to stay motivated. For example:

- It's worth finishing the next assignment if it's going to lead to a promotion at work.
- It's worth doing the reading if it means you finally understand something you've been struggling with for years.
- It's worth trying again and again if eventually you can craft a strong written argument, tune up a complicated motor, or make a crème brulee that would make a chef jealous.

You may not feel like doing the work now, but will the results be relevant to you? Will they be worth it?



Take action!

How is this course directly relevant to you, and your life?

List 3 ways this course will make your life better.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Step 3: Apply your new knowledge to what you already know

Chances are you already know a little something about what you're studying. I'll bet the topic's either a personal interest, or involves your working life. That means you already have some kind of background in the subject. You're not starting from scratch.

That knowledge in itself can make you feel a bit more powerful and engaged with the course. Think about it for a moment – you're not a complete beginner at all.



So how can you draw on what you already know to make the learning process easier? How is your background a good foundation for what you're learning now? Do you already have books, clippings, computer files, movies or other resources on the subject?

Maybe you have existing contacts with experts on the subject you're studying. Is this the perfect time to pick up the phone, or send an email? Talking with an expert could also help you stay connected with the course.

Use your existing resources (human, digital, printed, alien – whatever!) to help keep your levels of motivation high.



Take action!

What kind of knowledge or experience do you already have about this subject?

1. _____
2. _____

What resources do you already have?

1. _____
2. _____

Who do you know who shares your passion?

1. _____
2. _____

Step 4: How can you use your new skills right now?

You can top up your levels of motivation by applying your new skills right away, as you learn them.

Let's say you're taking a course in how to use the spread sheet programme Excel. You know some of the basics, but your boss keeps asking you to do Excel tasks that are way beyond your skill level. So you enrol in an online course.

This seemed a good idea at the time, but the reality's less than stimulating. You're wondering how you're ever going to find the willpower to make it to the end of the course.

You can increase your self-motivation by practicing your new skills as they develop. As you pick up new knowledge, apply it at work. Perform some more complicated calculations with a spread sheet, or produce a polished and professional graph of some important figures. Notice that you're starting to feel more confident, and less overwhelmed.

Remind yourself that the course has value to you right now – and this is only going to increase, the more you learn.

If the learning's clearly worthwhile and is already helping you, it'll be easier to motivate yourself to stay the distance.



Take action!

How can you apply your new skills and knowledge, right now?

1. _____
2. _____

As you can see, you don't have to be born with high levels of self-motivation. There are ways of staying motivated to study – even when you don't really feel like it.



What to take out of this lesson

The key points are:

1. E-learning's easier when you're self-motivated. And self-motivation can be developed.
2. Understanding your reasons for learning can help to keep you on track.
3. You probably already know something about what you're learning. Why not draw on your existing knowledge and develop it further?
4. By making the learning relevant and applicable to your current needs, it's easier to remember what's in this for you.

Lesson 4 Can't it wait 'til tomorrow?

Procrastination doesn't seem that big a deal, does it? After all, everyone procrastinates. We do it every day.

But in e-learning, it can be a real problem. Procrastination can seriously threaten your e-learning progress.

Here's the thing. When you put off studying until "later," suddenly you have 3 assignments due the same week, and you haven't started any of them.

Then suddenly a big project at work starts up, which means you're putting in extra office hours. This weekend is jam-packed with commitments. Oh, and now your two year old's sick...

"Later" has just been postponed for another 2 weeks.



Why is it so easy to procrastinate with e-learning?

It's *shockingly* easy to procrastinate when you learn online. E-learning somehow seems to invite it. In an online environment, you can procrastinate without even noticing you're doing it. There are two reasons for this.

1. You're already online, so the whole internet's a potential distraction

Before you log in to your online class, you think maybe you'll just check the news headlines, do a little online banking, and fire off some quick emails...

Two hours later, you've found a great new blog and bought the perfect hammock in an online auction. But you haven't quite gotten around to logging in to your course.

2. The flexibility of e-learning makes it way too easy to put off getting down to work

If you don't read that chapter now, you can read it later, right? If you don't start the assignment now, you can start it tomorrow. Or the day after.

After all, you don't have to show up to class, and no-one will know.

But, as we've seen above, this approach can lead to more chaos than you can imagine – missed deadlines, a million pages of reading to catch up on, and stress, stress, stress.

But the chaos can be avoided. Here's how.

How to conquer procrastination

Step 1: Who's in charge here?

Remember, with e-learning, there's no-one standing over you, checking that you've done your homework or brought your lunch. No-one will know whether you've done the reading or submitted the assignments.

That is, until you get your course results. Then the truth will be revealed.

That's why you have to become answerable to yourself. You're running the show here.

Hold yourself to your deadlines. Schedule your study periods, and treat them as appointments to learn. You wouldn't miss a doctor's appointment because you spent four hours shopping on the internet. Treat your study periods the same way.



Take action!

Be prepared to be the authority figure in your own learning process. Don't expect your tutor to check up on you.

This is quite a big mental shift. Think about it for a few minutes.

Step 2: What tempts you the most?

What kinds of distractions do you find hardest to resist?

What do you “accidentally” spend hours doing, without really meaning to?

Maybe it’s:

- Watching a whole series on DVD?
- Chatting on the phone or texting?
- Emailing? Facebook?
- Watching YouTube?
- Shopping?
- Online gaming?
- Riding strange looking bikes?

Let’s take a second here to remember that these activities are not automatically evil. They’re valid ways to have fun, and having fun’s not a bad thing.

The challenge is to...

Take control of when you learn, and when you have fun.

If you need to finish reading a chapter by tonight, or complete an online exam within the next 2 hours, distractions will have to wait. Not forever. Just until you’ve met your current e-learning commitment.

The challenge is to make a smart choice, and decide which is more urgent: learning, or relaxing. Which option will get you where you want to go?

There are plenty of ways to reduce temptation. Turn off your email and phone. Promise yourself you’ll get on the internet *after* you’ve finished your assignment. Record this week’s episode of *CSI* and watch it later as a reward.



Take action!

List your top 3 distractions. How are you going to make sure they don't get in the way of your learning progress?

Distraction 1. _____

How are you going to control it? _____

Distraction 2. _____

How are you going to control it? _____

Distraction 3. _____

How are you going to control it? _____

Step 3: Excuses as procrastination

Procrastination's a tricky creature. Sometimes it'll change its shape.

You might expect it to take the form of a reality TV marathon. Or an all-day hunt for a new pair of boots. Those kinds of procrastination are easy to spot.

But procrastination can be more devious than that. Sometimes it'll show up as an **excuse** rather than a tempting **activity**.

If you're too tired, too busy, or just plain don't feel like it, you may be finding excuses to put off e-learning until a better time. That's still procrastination. Because you may not feel like starting your assignment tomorrow, either. Or the day after.

Once you start noticing this habit, you can reverse the trend. The next time you hear yourself making excuses for why you can't study today, try finding a reason for why you *can*. It's not rocket science. It's a simple reversal exercise.

Let's look at some examples.

If you make the excuse:

I just can't face working on my assignment now

you could try replacing it with:

If I finish this assignment now, I can submit it, and take the night off.

How about:

I'm just too busy this week to do any study.

In reality, you can probably find the time you need. (Remember Lesson 2, where we found little pockets of study time all over the place?) This sounds like an excuse.

You could reverse the statement by saying:

Hang on, didn't I schedule study breaks for this week? There must be enough time in there to at least make a start on Module 3...



Take action!

What are your top 2 **excuses** not to study? How can you turn them around to help motivate rather than distract you?

Excuse 1. _____

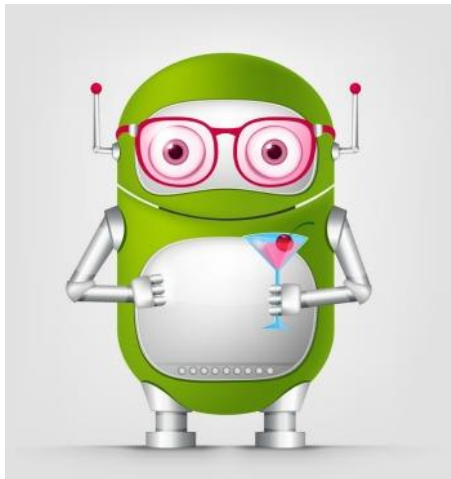
How are you going to turn it around? _____

Excuse 2. _____

How are you going to turn it around? _____

Step 4: Good distractions versus bad distractions

Let's keep some perspective here. No-one's suggesting you give up all the fun, distracting parts of your life.



Distractions are only a problem when they get in the way of your study.

When your distractions are *planned*, that's called rewarding yourself for all your hard work. This is a good thing! It provides a balance, and stops you from burning out. Rewards are important. Without rewards, you'll quickly start resenting squeezing e-learning into a schedule that's already crammed pretty full.

So the key here is to learn how to tell the difference between a good distraction, and a bad one.

A bad distraction means you're finding excuses or activities that stop you from studying.

That's procrastination.

A good distraction means your assignment's finished, and you're celebrating a job well done.

That's a reward.



Take action!

What activity keeps trying to distract you that you could reschedule for later as a reward?
List three of them and add them to your schedule as rewards.

1. This is distracting me now _____

When can I use it as a reward? _____

2. This is distracting me now _____

When can I use it as a reward? _____

3. This is distracting me now _____

As you can see, procrastination comes in many shapes and forms. Now you know the dangers, it might become a little easier to choose “now” rather than “later” for getting down to work!



What to take out of this lesson

The key points are:

1. Procrastination directly threatens your learning progress when it's not kept in check.
2. Know your distraction weaknesses, and procrastination can't steal your study periods.
3. Replace excuses for not studying with reasons to achieve.
4. Taking control of distractions and rescheduling them for later transforms them into legitimate rewards.

Lesson 5 When deadlines attack

Deadlines...

The word alone is enough to make you want to go straight into hiding.

Deadlines can trigger some nasty emotions – anxiety, fear, stress. When an urgent deadline's roaring towards you at top speed, it's a scary sight.

When a deadline's coming at you fast, you probably start worrying that:

- You won't get the work done in time
- Rushing your assignment means it might fail
- You'll have to re-schedule half your week to get it done at the last minute
- You have to forget about having any fun (and any sleep!) until you meet the deadline.

Oh, it's an ugly business alright.

But is it *all* ugly?

Deadlines: the good, the bad and the ugly.

Believe it or not, deadlines don't have to wreck your life. They have a good side too. Often, they're actually helping you out in some subtle, hard-to-spot ways.

A deadline can do three positive things for you. It will:

- Make sure you complete each section of a unit
- Help you chart your progress, and
- Keep you moving ahead towards completing the course.

These are all very good things.



So deadlines are not quite as ugly – or terrifying – as they look. Catch them in the right light, and they almost look kind of appealing...

Let's talk about how to make deadlines less frightening, and a lot more attractive.

How to deal with any deadline

Step 1: Know where they are – and when they're coming

Deadlines and due dates are always the worst kept secret of any course. Remember: no-one's trying to trap you into failing. The due dates for all your pieces of assessment will be in plain sight, and easily found.

The key is to spot them as early on as you can. Log in to your course page, and look for the Course Outline or Assessments link. If they're not there, try the Due Dates section.

When you find them, simply make a note of all the deadlines for each of your units. Add them to your calendar, and then highlight them, so you can't possibly miss them.



Take action!

Identify your semester's deadlines, and mark them in your calendar now. A deadline can't surprise you when you know weeks in advance that it's on the way.

Step 2: Set up an early-warning system

So you've spotted the next deadline, off in the distance.

The next step is to make sure you're working towards that crucial date. An early-warning system will let you know when to start.

Here's how to set up your own deadline warning system. Go back to your calendar, where each deadline's marked and highlighted. Two weeks before each deadline, make a note, a warning to yourself. Something like: Assignment 1 - due 3 October.

Do the same a week before the deadline, then 2 days before. Now you have plenty of warning.

And, if you're not on track to meet the deadline, now you have time to do something about it. You'll notice it's coming at you weeks in advance.

You can work on your assignment calmly and regularly, rather than stay up for 2 days solid, trying to fit months of work into one soul-crushing, epic essay writing session.



Take action!

Set up an early-warning system for all your deadlines now on your calendar – make a note 2 weeks, 1 week and then 2 days before each deadline.

Step 3: What if you can't make the deadline?

Sometimes Life will get in the way of even the most organised plan. You might have to work late, travel or even move house. You just can't plan for everything.

If there's really no way you can make a deadline, don't panic. You don't have to drop out of your course just yet.

Simply contact your tutor – well before the due date if possible – and explain your situation. With e-learning, there's often some flexibility available for learners with real issues.

How to ask for an extension

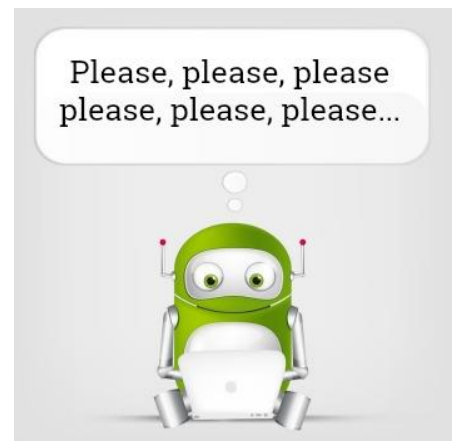
When you absolutely, positively can't make a deadline, your best option's to ask for an extension. Asking for an extension is a skill in itself. But like all elements of e-learning, it's not particularly mysterious or complicated.

Your request's more likely to be successful if you're:

- Polite (you're asking for a favour, remember)
- Honest (you don't get extra points for long, elaborate excuses), and
- Reasonable (don't ask for an extra 2 weeks if 3 days will make all the difference).

And never forget the final stage in the process – say “thank you” when your tutor agrees to be flexible!

(This is more than common courtesy. It's money in the bank in case you ever need another favour in the future!)



Take action!

If you're looking down the barrel of an impossible deadline, ask for an extension now, using the guidelines outlined above.

Step 4: What if you've already missed the deadline?

You may be halfway through your semester by the time you read this guide. What if you're studying without a system in place like the one described here? You might have missed a deadline (or two) already.

What can you do?

Don't assume you've failed the course. Find out what your options are, by contacting your tutor as soon as you can. Own up to your oversight – explain what the problem has been, and ask for your tutor's advice.

You might want to suggest a plan for catching up, and submitting the missing work. It may still be possible to complete the assignments in time to pass the course.

Often, your tutor will be pleased that you've kept her in the loop. By making contact and explaining your situation, you're showing respect for the requirements of the course.



Take action!

If you've missed a deadline, make contact with your tutor, and find out what your options are for making up the work. Do it today.

When you have a system for managing deadlines, they're no longer so ugly or threatening. Your stress levels are reduced, and your progress through the course is a lot smoother.



What to take out of this lesson

The key points are:

1. Deadlines don't have to be a source of fear; they can be managed with the right approach.
2. Deadlines can help you to chart your progress and move towards a particular goal.
3. Missing a deadline's not the end of the world – there are practical steps you can take to get your learning back on track.
4. There may be more flexibility with deadlines than you expect – after all, this is e-learning!

Lesson 6 Is there anyone out there?

Will e-learning make you feel like the last person left on earth? Will you have to adopt 25 cats so you don't die of loneliness while you study?

Well, that's mostly up to you.

When you learn online, you may never meet your tutor or fellow students in the flesh. You won't get chatting after a lecture and go for coffee or a beer. You can't, because face to face contact is largely replaced by online communication.

But a lack of flesh-and-blood contact doesn't mean you have to study in a vacuum, sealed off from the world in a silent bubble. You may not be able to see or hear the other people in your course, but that doesn't mean you're alone.



Finding your own support network

It's up to you to set up your own support network. This is not as hard as it sounds. You already connect in ways that don't involve physically standing in the same room as the other person.

Think about it. You communicate without using all your senses in one way or another every day, by:

- Phone
- Email
- Instant Messaging
- Facebook
- Texting

- Internet forums
- And probably several more ways...

The people in your course aren't in a classroom with you, it's true. But they're real people. They do exist. And there are other forms of invisible support out there, too. The challenge here is to go search them out.

Let's look at some ways of actively growing your own support network.

How to avoid e-learning isolation

Step 1: What are your communication options?

At the beginning of your course, you'll likely get an information pack which tells you everything you need to know. It probably covers how to communicate with everyone connected with the course: your fellow students, the admin people, the IT Help Desk, Student Support, your tutor, and the course co-ordinator.

Your facilitator might have a direct dial number you can call. There may be online instructions about the best channels for talking about the course material, asking questions, or solving particular kinds of problems.

There *will* be avenues of communication open to you. You simply need to find out what they are.



Take action!

Scour your information pack and/or the online course information. Discover how to stay in touch with others in the course.

How can you contact your fellow students? _____

How can you contact your facilitator? _____

Step 2: Try out the discussion boards

When you've never used them, the online forums or discussion boards can seem intimidating. They're an invitation to look stupid in public, surely. Because what should you say? What if your comment is "wrong"? What if your message displays oddly?

These fears are normal. Everyone else in your course is sitting in front of their computers, wondering what to say, too. But in an online environment no-one can see you, remember? You'll probably never physically meet many of the people in your course. How can it hurt to take the first step?



Many online courses involve you taking part in online discussions. If there's a discussion board section in your Learning Management System, take the lead and get the conversation going.

Saying "hello" in an online environment is not the scariest thing you'll ever do. Not even close.

When you've made your friendly introductory comment, you just need to be patient, and wait for someone to respond. It might take just minutes, or several days. Your fellow learners may be busy, or they may just be scared. Or both.

You can't physically see your fellow students, but you're all sitting in the same boat. There's no rule that says you can't talk to each other.



Take action!

Be the first to post a response to a discussion board question, or leave an ice-breaking message in the general discussion area. Introduce yourself, and talk about what you hope to get out of the course. Be friendly and brief.

(Didn't hurt a bit, did it...?)

Step 3: Cast a wider net

What can you do if your fellow learners are being stubbornly silent? What if you post the best opening message ever written, but no-one responds?

It can happen. If it does, look somewhere else for company.

Because you're already online, you have plenty of alternatives. The internet's a big place! Try an online search on the topic you're studying. See if any interest groups gather online to talk about their experiences. You may find a useful website or forum that helps you connect with other people who share your interests and challenges.

You're building your own support network, remember – there's a whole world of people out there having e-learning experiences. They won't be that hard to find.



Take action!

Spend half an hour scouring the internet for relevant interest groups you could be a part of. Bookmark the most useful site, join a discussion forum, post a question... get involved right away.

Remember to put a time limit on your search, as this activity could easily expand to devour most of a day. (And then you're back in procrastination territory...)

Step 4: Find a virtual (or actual) study buddy

Sooner or later, the discussion boards on your course will get going. It might take a while, but eventually there'll be a lively exchange of ideas.

Check to see if anyone has left feedback, or some interesting input on what you've posted. You might make a connection with one or two people in the course who seem to be right on your wavelength. If so, fantastic!

You could also ask if anyone's studying in your local area. You never know where people are based until you ask. There might be 3 or 4 people studying the same online course in your own city. In this case, you could all meet up face to face or via phone when you need extra support during the course.



A word of warning

Obviously, use your common sense and don't make private plans with the one student who only posts really strange comments on the discussion boards, and wants to meet you at your house! It's up to you to protect yourself: meet in public places, in a group, and be very careful about giving out personal information to people you don't know.



Take action!

Have a quick look on the discussion forums for your course to see if anyone has already suggested setting up a study group in your area.

If not, float the idea yourself, and see who responds. Arrange your study sessions in a public place and get to know each other in a safe environment.

All the rules and warnings of internet dating apply here!

You could also arrange to talk on the phone or email particular members of the group who you work well with.

It's not true that there's no social aspect to e-learning. Online learning is simply different from traditional learning – most interaction is online rather than face-to-face. Once you make this mental shift, you'll realise e-learning doesn't have to be a solo experience, and there are plenty of opportunities to connect.



What to take out of this lesson

The key points are:

1. In e-learning, you must find an alternative to traditional support networks.
2. Remember, everyone's nervous. Take the initiative, and reach out to people wherever possible.
3. There will be many places on the internet where people just like you are discussing your topic. Find one or two, and make some new online friends.
4. Try to find a study buddy or study group you can meet either in person or by email or phone – without compromising your personal safety, of course.

That's the last lesson in this guide – you made it!

By now, you know a lot more about how to learn online effectively. The process is nowhere near as scary as it once looked, is it?

There's really no limit to what you can learn from here...

About the author, Dr. Liz Hardy

I'm the founder of SimpliTeach.com, a collection of resources and articles which help online teachers work more efficiently.

I've used my PhD in English and Diploma in Adult Education over the last 10 years in a range of e-learning settings.

I've worked with over 5,000 online students in 23 papers, at all levels, from beginners to graduates.

I know from personal experience that learning can change everything – and that getting over the fear is worth it.

