



**PARENT GUIDE**

**TO ONLINE**

**LEARNING**

**VIRTUAL ARKANSAS**

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# INTRODUCTION

**This guide has been prepared for parents, guardians, counselors, and others who want to help students decide whether online courses are a good option for them.**

In the pages that follow, you will find information about:

- Online learning opportunities,
- Characteristics of a successful online learner, and
- How to prepare for learning online.

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Virtual Arkansas is a State Virtual School (SVS) that partners with local schools to provide course opportunities to students that otherwise might not be available with local resources. We are not an online high school or a diploma-granting institution but are a resource for supplementing the education for local students. The program is implemented through a partnership between the Arkansas Department of Education and the Arkansas Education Service Cooperatives. This initiative is guided by Act 2325 of 2005: An Act to Provide Distance Learning.

- To help alleviate the teacher shortage
- To provide additional course-scheduling opportunities for students
- To provide an opportunity to access an enriched curriculum
- To develop and make available online professional development

Visit our website to learn more about Virtual Arkansas and read our Vision, Mission, and Core Values | [virtualarkansas.org](https://virtualarkansas.org)

# WHY ONLINE LEARNING

Students take online courses for a variety of reasons. They may be full-time online students, taking all their courses over the Internet, or they may be part-time online students, supplementing the courses they take at their school with online courses – including during summer. Many students use online courses for credit recovery when they have failed a class required for their program or graduation. Others take courses that their schools cannot or do not offer. Many students take Advanced Placement (AP) courses because there are not enough students in their school to offer a face-to-face AP class. Some use online courses for elective credit and personal enrichment.

Today’s learning environments are changing, and national experts have published the following 10 attributes to describe Next Generation Learning models. The Virtual Learning Leadership Alliance has identified how online learning can be used to support the 10 attributes. From the student’s point of view, online learning is attractive because it is:

## 1 PERSONALIZED

to my needs and learning goals. When students select their courses, they take greater ownership.

## 2 FLEXIBLE

so that I can try different ways to learn. Online learning allows scheduling to accommodate health, athletic, job, and family circumstances.

## 3 INTERACTIVE AND ENGAGING

to draw me in. Students meet people outside their community in a safe environment, and multimedia used in online learning provides different ways of learning.

## 4 RELEVANT

to the life, I’d like to lead. Students gain more experience using the 21st-century technology tools used in college and in the workplace.

## 5 PACED BY MY OWN PROGRESS

measured against goals I understand. Students can move faster or slower through assignments and track their own progress toward their goals.

## 6 CONSTANTLY INFORMED

by different ways of demonstrating and measuring my progress. Educational technology can measure and share student progress quickly.

## 7 COLLABORATIVE

with faculty, peers, and others; unlimited by proximity. Students can access learning materials and resources – including local, state, and national experts – using online communication tools.

## 8 RESPONSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE

when I need extra help. Communicating outside the typical school day is supported by the online learning culture. Many students – and teachers – report they spend more time interacting online than in the face-to-face classroom.

## 9 CHALLENGING BUT ACHIEVABLE

with opportunities to become an expert in an area of interest. Online learning reinforces lifelong learning skills and promotes information literacy and communication skills as well as thinking and problemsolving skills.

## 10 AVAILABLE

to me as much as it is to every other student. Online learning can direct the talents of some of the most skilled educators to the most underserved populations. A zip code does not have to determine learning options any more.

NOW THAT YOU KNOW WHY MANY STUDENTS LIKE LEARNING ONLINE, YOU WILL FIND ANSWERS TO SOME OF YOUR OTHER QUESTIONS IN THE SECTIONS THAT FOLLOW. THIS BRIEF LIST OF TERMS MAY BE HELPFUL AS YOU INVESTIGATE ONLINE LEARNING.

# DEFINITIONS

## ONLINE FACILITATOR

This term is used in two ways. 1) for part-time online programs the person working face to face with the online student to monitor student progress and attendance, providing training, assisting in motivating the student, etc. The person may or may not be a certified teacher but works in conjunction with the certified online teacher. 2) Used interchangeably with an online teacher or online educator.

## LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (LMS)

The technology platform through which students access online courses. A LMS generally includes software for creating and editing course content, communication tools, assessment tools, and other features for managing the course. (Northwest Educational Technology Consortium, 2005) Virtual Arkansas uses the Canvas platform for their LMS

## MOU

Memorandum of Understanding document(s) signed by the school district, parents, and students entering into agreement for online course access.

## ONLINE LEARNING

Education in which instruction and content are delivered primarily over the Internet. (Watson & Kalmon, 2005) The term does not include printed-based correspondence education, broadcast television or radio, videocassettes, and standalone educational software programs that do not have a significant Internet-based instructional component. (U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development Policy and Program Studies Service, 2010) Used interchangeably with Virtual learning, Cyber learning, elearning

## ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

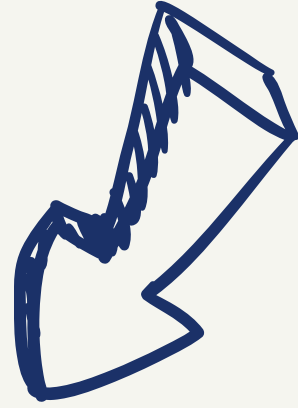
Communication exchanges occur in elapsed time between two or more people. Examples are email, online discussion forums, message boards, blogs, podcasts, etc.

## SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Communication exchanges occur in real-time or live between two or more people. Examples include live Zoom sessions, face to face instruction, live chats.c.

**VISION**  
**WE ARE THE PREMIER DIGITAL**  
**SOURCE DELIVERING**  
**OPPORTUNITIES & BUILDING**  
**FOUNDATIONS**  
**FOR STUDENTS ACHIEVING THEIR**  
**DREAMS.**

# FIRST THINGS FIRST



**The most important question you have to answer is whether your student is well suited to an online learning environment.**

## PROFILE OF A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT

Instructors with years of online teaching experience agree that students who have a successful, satisfying experience learning online share several critical characteristics:

### GOOD TIME MANAGEMENT

Can your student create and maintain a study schedule throughout the semester without the face-to-face interaction with a teacher?

### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Can your student ask for help, make contact with other students and the instructor online, and describe any problems she/he has with learning materials using email, texting and/or the telephone?

### INDEPENDENT STUDY HABITS

Can your student study and complete assignments without direct supervision and maintain the self-discipline to stick to a schedule?

### SELF - MOTIVATION

Does your student have a strong desire to learn skills, acquire knowledge and fulfill assignments in online courses because of an educational goal? Can she/he maintain focus on that goal?

### ACADEMIC READINESS

Does your student have the basic reading, writing, math and computer literacy skills to succeed in the class?

### TECHNOLOGICALLY PREPARED

Does your student know how to open, create and/or save a document; use various technology tools (e.g., dictionary, thesaurus, grammar checker, calculator); and identify various file formats (e.g., doc, xls, pdf, jpg)?

Counselors and teachers often use the Virtual Online Readiness Rubric on page 9 to help students understand what is required of a successful online learner. If you identify areas in the rubric where your student is lacking, you can determine what needs to be addressed to best support them in those areas. See *Is Online Learning Right for Me?* on page 10 for more guidance.

# MAKING THE DECISION

As a parent, your role in helping your student decide if online learning is the most effective way for him/her to learn is extremely important. You need to determine if your student is well suited to online learning. Using the rubric and the skills mentioned in the previous section as a starting point for the conversation is the first thing to do. Once you decide your student is likely to be successful, you have additional issues to consider.

## CORE VALUES

STUDENTS

RELATIONSHIPS

INTEGRITY

COLLABORATION

INNOVATION

QUALITY

## TECHNOLOGY

- What are the technical requirements for the courses your student wants/needs to take?
- Can you provide the technology your student needs or will the school district?
- Are there well-defined steps for getting tech support

## LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Does the school or provider offer an orientation for parents, students, and facilitators?
- What kind of feedback and support does the instructor provide?
- What kind of assistance does the facilitator provide?

## CONSIDERING THE COURSE

- Does the course meet academic requirements?
- Has the course been approved for credit by the school of record?
- Are there prerequisites for online courses? Has your student met the prerequisites?
- Does the course meet NCAA Eligibility Requirements for potential Division I and II student-athletes?
- How rigid are the course assignment due dates?
- Are the test dates flexible or rigid?
- What is the time commitment (daily and length of term)?
- Does the course have e-texts or are textbooks required?
- How do students receive their final grades?

# SUPPORT

It is important to know what kind of support the student will receive from his or her primary district or the provider district or provider offering the online course. Facilitators in particular are critical to student success in online learning. Be sure to know who the facilitator assigned to your student's course is and how to contact him or her. It is also important to know what kind of support the parent or guardian is expected to provide. If your student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or is eligible for special needs support or special education services, contact the school of record for further information.

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Questions to ask about the role your local or host school plays:

- What is the responsibility of the school?
- What is the responsibility of the parent?
- Who is the facilitator?
- Does an instructor, a facilitator, or a paraprofessional aide provide face-to-face support at your student's local resident district?
- How do you get support for IEP compliance?
- What kinds of resources are available to students and parents?

# OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

- **Accreditation** – Has the online course provider earned accreditation from a recognized regional or national accrediting body?
- **Credit** – Will successful completion of the course generates credit?
- **Teaching standards** – What requirements, guidelines or additional information does the provider share on their website?
- **Data** – What kind of data does the provider have to share about the course completion?
- **Quality** – Has the course been reviewed against quality standards, and if so, do they meet your needs and expectations?



# BEFORE YOU DECIDE

- Ask questions.
- Consider the time required each day for coursework.
- Participate in webinars offered by the provider.
- Let the student choose the specific online course whenever possible.

# BEFORE ENROLLING

Once you decide your student is well prepared to take a course online, he or she understands what will be required to be successful, and you find the appropriate course, review the following checklist to be sure you're ready.

## CHECKLIST

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The student has access to the technology needed on a regular basis to work on assignments.                   | <input type="checkbox"/> The student understands that online courses often take as much or more time than face-to-face courses. | <input type="checkbox"/> The student knows the course grade will become part of the academic record.   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The student has a place to complete work.  | <input type="checkbox"/> The student has sufficient time in his/her schedule to complete assignments.                           | <input type="checkbox"/> The student knows the start and end dates of the course.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The student has the basic computer skills needed to navigate the course and complete and submit assignments. | <input type="checkbox"/> The school offers a facilitator or another adult to support the student's online learning as needed.   | <input type="checkbox"/> The student is willing and able to ask for help from the online instructor via email, text, phone, or in person and respond to the instructor using the same methods. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The student has support for her or his IEP.  | <input type="checkbox"/> The student knows who the facilitator is and how to contact him/her.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> You and the student know how to contact the technology department to resolve technical issues.  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The course fits in the student's academic plan.  | <input type="checkbox"/> The student needs the credits.   |  |

## VIRTUAL ARKANSAS COURSE CATALOG

Virtual Arkansas' Course Catalog is available to the public on our website at [www.virtualarkansas.org](http://www.virtualarkansas.org). The catalog contains a course description and denotes whether a course is NCAA approved and/or Act 1280 approved.



# ADVICE FOR PARENTS

Advice for parents once your student is enrolled, before class starts and until the course is completed:

- Set up a study space, including the technology required.
- Be prepared for technical issues that may come up.
- Review the syllabus with your student.
- Define expectations.
- Agree on incentives and consequences.
- Reinforce that online courses are as important as traditional, face-to-face courses.
- See that your student establishes a routine for working on his/her virtual course daily.
- Help your student maintain a regular study schedule.
- Monitor your student's progress weekly using your access to the course LMS.

## Final Suggestions

If you decide your student is not quite ready for online learning, you can prepare him or her for a successful experience in a subsequent semester.

- Build online fluencies: Help your student become familiar with organizing documents (setting up files and folders), and saving documents in different formats.
- Look at provider websites for webinars and resources directed at parents and students: When you discover those together, you can generate questions for your school and the provider. Talk about what your student is ready for and what areas might need some work.
- This is another way for you to discover what to expect and talk through opportunities and concerns before your student commits to an online course.
- Talk with the person at your student's school who is most familiar with online learning – your school's facilitator, curriculum specialist, or counselor and ask what materials or suggestions they have to help you make the decision.

## MISSION

OUR MISSION IS TO  
**EQUIP, ENGAGE,  
& EMPOWER STUDENTS  
THROUGH UNIQUE  
DIGITAL OPPORTUNITES.**

# Resources

## Online Learner Readiness Rubric

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Readiness	Technology Skills	Work & Study Habits	Learning Style	Technology / Connectivity	Time Management	Interests/Motivation	Reading/Writing Skills	Support Services
<p><b>Less Ready</b></p> <p>↓</p>	Student has little, if any, experience using a computer or the Internet and has minimal desire to develop more skills in this area.	Student often needs reminders to complete routine assignments, often turns homework in late and is not able to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course.	Student is not a self-directed learner and often requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student does not have consistent access to a computer and a reliable connection to the Internet at home or at school.	Student does not manage his or her time effectively in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has little or no interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a negative or unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading below grade level and has experienced difficulty with routine writing assignments.	In general, parents and school personnel do not actively support online learning and are unable or unwilling to provide support assistance.
	Student has limited experience using a computer and the Internet and has expressed a strong interest in developing more skills in this area.	Student sometimes needs reminders and assistance in completing routine assignments and has pledged to spend 5-10 hours per week on each online course enrollment.	Student is beginning to demonstrate a behavior of self-directed learning and sometimes requires real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow up support.	Student has limited access to a computer with low-speed Internet service at school or at home.	Student is beginning to demonstrate effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering but has expressed concerns about enrolling in an online course or has an unrealistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at grade level and has demonstrated limited proficiency with writing assignments.	Student support system is limited and parents and school personnel are somewhat supportive of enrollment in online courses.
<p><b>More Ready</b></p> <p>↓</p>	Student has strong computer skills and more than adequate experience using a word processor, email application and web browser.	Student rarely needs reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments and has demonstrated good independent study habits.	In general, the student is self-directed and does not require real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support.	Student has consistent access to a computer with moderate-speed Internet service at home or at school.	Student has demonstrated effective time management skills in doing research, basic studies and preparing for tests or quizzes.	Student has an interest in the content area of the online course offering and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading at or above grade level and has demonstrated success with a variety of writing assignments.	Student has open access to school-based facilitating/counseling service and parental support.
	Student has excellent computer skills and significant experience using a word processor, email application and web browser, and is comfortable downloading information from the Internet and using other technology tools and applications.	Student does not need reminders or assistance in completing routine assignments, usually finishes homework ahead of time and has successfully completed an independent study experience or taken an online course.	Student is a self-directed learner and demonstrates a high level of comfort and skill in learning new material without requiring real-time feedback from teachers regarding basic directions and follow-up support, and deals well with ambiguity.	Student has daily access to a computer with high-speed Internet service at home and at a convenient location in the school building before, during and after regular school hours.	Student has demonstrated outstanding time management skills while participating in a variety of clubs, student organizations, sports and work activities.	Student has a strong interest in the content area of the online course offering, is highly motivated to enroll in an online course and has a positive and realistic attitude toward online learning.	Student is reading above grade level, has strong reading comprehension skills and has demonstrated success with complex writing assignments.	Student has regularly scheduled access to school-based facilitating/counseling services, parental support is strong and district has adopted policies and identified best practices to support students as online learners.

**Note:** This rubric was not designed to be used as a tool to determine eligibility for enrollment in online courses, but instead to be used as a resource to help identify specific areas where students may need additional support to better ensure success.

Adapted from Michigan Virtual

# IS ONLINE LEARNING RIGHT FOR ME?

Online learning offers great flexibility for students of all skill sets, but it's important to know if it's the right learning style for you. These questions will help you make that determination.

## ARE YOU SELF-DIRECTED AND MOTIVATED?

- Most of online learning happens on your schedule.
- You'll need to be self-directed and motivated to complete activities and initiate the communication required to be successful.
- You'll be responsible for creating the structure to finish each course.

## ARE YOUR TECHNICAL SKILLS ADEQUATE?

- You need to be comfortable with Internet browsing and searching, email, sending and reading attachments, word processing, and occasionally downloading and installing software plug-ins (a normally simple, but sometimes intimidating task).

## DO YOU HAVE STRONG READING/WRITING SKILLS?

- The ability to read and comprehend subject matter without it being a chore is critical to your success.
- In most cases writing is the primary method of communication in online classes, so you should be at ease expressing your thoughts, sharing ideas and asking questions through writing.

## WILL YOU ASK QUESTIONS WHEN YOU NEED TO?

- If you typically don't hesitate to seek help you'll do fine.
- Since you'll be in an online environment it's important to let your instructor and classmates know when you need assistance.
- Remember they won't be able to see your expressions of doubt, confusion, or other body languages to indicate when things aren't going well.

## WILL YOU MISS THE SOCIAL INTERACTION?

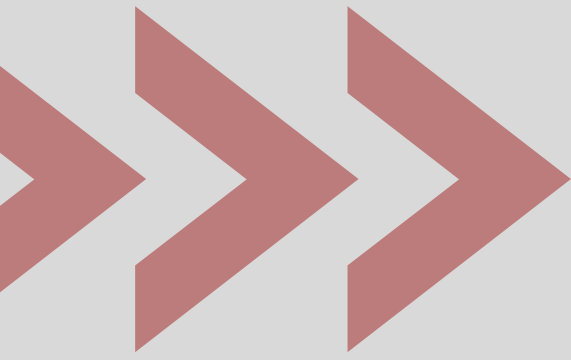
- Interaction with instructors and classmates in online learning is often an integral part of the learning experience.
- Absent is the in-person contact — being able to see facial expressions, hear reactions and speak.
- Campus life may be different or non-existent.

## DO YOU HAVE THE DISCIPLINE TO STUDY REGULARLY?

- Like a traditional school you'll need to set aside adequate time for study.
- You may discover you need to be online frequently to complete assignments or communicate with classmates and instructors.
- Plan to spend at least as much time working on assignments and studying as you would with a traditional course, and you'll be setting your own pace in many instances.







# **PARENT GUIDE** **TO ONLINE LEARNING**



**VIRTUAL ARKANSAS**

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