



ONLINE LEARNING GUIDE AND EMAIL ETIQUETTE

“In many ways, effective communication begins with mutual respect, communication that inspires and encourages others to do their best.” Zig Ziglar

Overview

Here in the Faculty of Social Sciences, UWI, Mona, we are proud to serve as role models for our students and to work with you as a team as we prepare you to become stellar graduates; the proud representatives of our brand as Social Scientists here at UWI, Mona.

While we feed your minds with various academic skills, we would like to ensure that we also help you in strengthening your skills by providing you with some important soft skills that are necessary to help you to achieve, personal, social and professional success. This document has been prepared to guide your etiquette in online settings, including your email etiquette.

Online Learning Guide

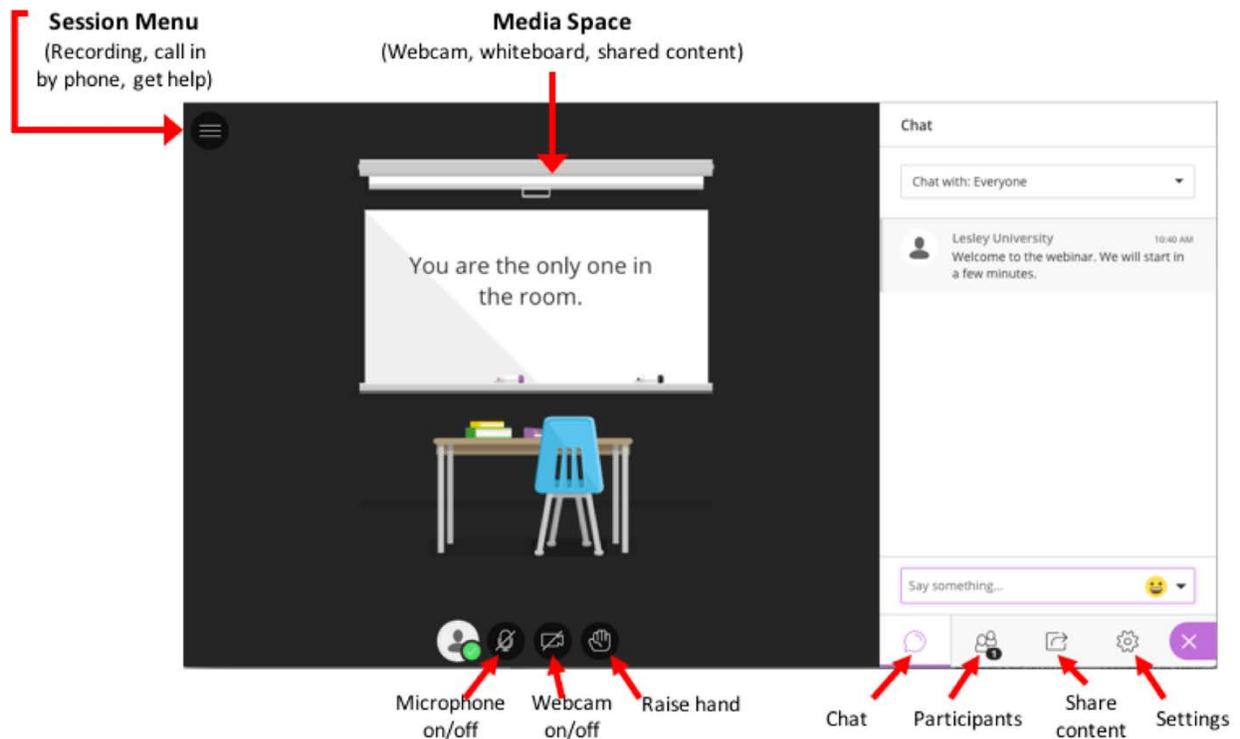
Online learning has suddenly become our new way of operating. The months have gone by quickly since March 2020, and we now know that we need to adapt our expectations and behaviours to get the very best from our online experience.

Getting the best online learning experience means taking a more active approach, such as being prepared to speak out in classes and tutorials, participate in discussions, and work collaboratively. Students who thrive in this new environment are self-directed, independent learners, who accept responsibility for organizing their learning.

Below are a few easy-to-follow rules to ensure you are making the best virtual impression and getting the most out of your online classes.

1. Be on time and ensure you are set up correctly.

Punctuality is especially important for online classes. Log into OurVLE at least five minutes before the start of the class, and locate Blackboard Collaborate (BbC). BbC is our virtual classroom solution that powers our online teaching. Check your microphone, and if it is your first online class, familiarize yourself with the interactive capabilities. Chat, polling, shared files, whiteboard, and other features can be accessed using the purple arrow icon in the bottom right corner of the page. Tools located at the top of the screen are participant controls to draw or write on whiteboards and/ or files. Please refer to the diagram below. Remember too that running other applications on your computer can slow your connection to the session.



2. Try to be aware of your surroundings, especially if you are using your webcam.

While we understand that there are some things beyond your control, try as best as you can to find a space where there is nothing in the background (e.g., traffic, other people, a pile of laundry) that may distract from the class. Your Instructor and classmates can see behind you.

3. "Mute" is your friend.

Once you log in to the virtual classroom, be sure to mute your microphone (lower left-hand corner). This will help to eliminate background noise that could distract the class. If, for any reason, you forget to mute your microphone, causing distraction, be quick to apologise once you realize.

4. Use the "Raise hand" button and wait to be called upon.

If you wish to speak, please use the "Raise Hand" button at the center of the bottom of your screen. Once the Instructor calls on you, unmute yourself and begin speaking. When you have finished speaking, indicate you are done by saying something like "That's all" or "Thank you" and then mute your microphone again. Please lower your hand once you have made your comment or your question has been answered.

5. Be Polite.

The chat feature is a tool to make comments and ask questions without interrupting the speaker but be aware that your comments are public and are recorded in the minutes of the session. Please take your posts seriously and review and edit your posts before sending. Avoid slang terms such as "wassup?" and texting abbreviations such as "u" instead of "you". Avoid using the caps lock feature AS IT CAN BE INTERPRETED AS SHOUTING. When communicating online, you should always treat your Instructor(s) and fellow classmates with respect. Avoid spamming the chat or sending the same

message repeatedly. Keep in mind that the chat shows the more recent messages; a student who sends messages in the chat without purpose drowns out the other students. Please remember, "You should always treat your Instructor(s) and fellow classmates with respect,". Do not say online what you would not say in person.

6. Give your full, focused attention.

It goes without saying that giving your focused attention is one of the best things you can do to learn efficiently. It may be tempting to use another device or engage with someone or something else in your surroundings rather than the class that you are a participant in. Side conversations with other students via another means of communication should be avoided. Show respect to the important learning process that you are engaged in during the online class, just as you would if you were physically present in person with your classmates. If you have to slip out of the class for a brief period, it is advisable that you indicate this in the chat, particularly if you are part of a small class or are expected to make a presentation during the class.

7. Participate fully.

Participating fully may look different depending on what your Instructor is expecting of you at any particular moment. At times, your Instructor will be leading the class in a discussion and this is when it is most important to speak up and share your thoughts. Of course, if your Instructor is simply sharing instructions with you, then participating fully means paying close attention to be sure you understand, writing anything down you do not want to forget, and being ready to ask any questions you have about confusing sections when the Instructor is done.

Avoid the tendency of some students to sit back and observe. When there is a glowing screen in front of us, we can default to passive spectator mode. Even if it is just taking notes, make the most of each online class by becoming as active a learner as you can be. Remember too that Lecturers are still required to be available for "office hours", and that you may contact them via email for assistance with clarifying difficult material etc.

8. Review your notes and the recording later.

Recordings of the classes are generally available one hour after the online session. It may be helpful to some students to use their notes and the recording for extra review of concepts that might have been difficult. Challenging concepts may not make sense on the first time through, but reviewing the recording again the next day might clarify all your questions. Keep in mind that it is always possible that the recording will fail or there will be a glitch in the technology. It is a good idea to take notes during the live sessions and not only rely on re-watching later.

9. Keep up with all readings and assignments.

One of the challenges posed by online learning is the increased level of responsibility that students will have for their own learning. It can be tempting to put off readings and assignments. Doing this once can have a spiral effect; you are likely to fall behind if you keep putting off readings and assignments.

Avoid the panic and the feeling of constantly being behind by setting up routines for yourself that ensure you are always on top of your assignments and readings. Adopt a mindset that each day you will review readings and focus on specific assignments and learning. Give yourself breaks and set micro-goals to ensure that you keep up the motivation.

Email Etiquette

Forms of address

The easiest way to address someone is to write "Dear X".

"Hi" is very colloquial and should not be used to address your Lecturer; it is only appropriate between students.

Titles

In the university context, there are three options: "Mr./Mrs. Ms.", "Dr." and "Prof". You may write "Dear Mr. Stevens". There are some individuals who may not be sensitive to titles; in this case a formal approach is still required. You may write: "Dear Michael Stevens".

Identifying yourself

Simply use your first and surname: "Samantha Laws". If you know your Lecturer well, you can use your first name. Do not assume that your Lecturer is aware of the course to which you refer. Indicate the class which you refer to as well.

Identifying others

If you are referring to another student, "my fellow student" or just the first name and surname of the person in question is appropriate. Reference to "colleague" is only used in the professional setting.

Before sending an email

- Use clear and concise language. Be respectful of the readers' time and attention.
- Ensure that your writing is grammatically correct, spelling mistakes are eliminated and that the correct punctuation is used.
- Avoid slang terms such as "hiyee" or "wassup?" and texting abbreviations such as "u" instead of "you".
- Limit and possibly avoid the use of emoticons. Not everyone knows how to interpret them.
- Be cautious when using humour or sarcasm as tone is sometimes lost in an email or chat post and your message might be taken literally or offensively. That said, be careful of the tone of your email. This is a professional exchange. You may not wish to convey the impression of being clueless, irresponsible or rude.
- Be sure to check that you are sending the message to the intended recipient before clicking the "send button". Also, if attachments are being sent, be sure to check that they are in place before clicking the "send" button. Finally, be sure to check your course resources before asking the Lecturer questions, since the information may have already been shared with you on OurVLE or elsewhere.
- Similarly, think before you send the e-mail to more than one recipient. Does everyone really need to see your message?

Salutation

There are a variety of ways to end your email. Examples include: "Best wishes", "Best regards", "Yours truly", "Yours faithfully", "Yours sincerely" etc. Shortened forms have become common and are not considered impolite for example: "Best, or Regards".

Timeframe for response

Lecturers get lots of emails; do not expect an instant response. Give two to three days for a response and if you do not hear from the Lecturer, just send the email again. The Lecturer may not have noticed it for several reasons. If you are sending an email while upset or angry, think about not sending it until you have cooled off. A 24-hour resting period is often a very good idea.

Student-Lecturer Interactions

1. **You are an adult:** This environment is a supportive environment for you to learn to accept responsibility for the ways in which you act. Students are expected to conduct themselves in a mature manner.
2. **All classes are important:** Lecturers put a lot of time and effort into preparing for their classes. If you miss a class it is your responsibility to get the information you have missed, you can do so by consulting with your classmates, and completing the readings. If you are unclear about something, then you can consult your Lecturer. You should however be prepared before you go to your Lecturer. If you do consult your Lecturer be sure to indicate what you did to prepare to meet with them; this information will be appreciated.
3. **Your GPA is your responsibility:** Be consistent in reviewing your performance. Discuss any challenges that may be impacting your performance early in your courses. Follow up on your assignments and ascribed grades.
4. **Be respectful:** The University is an environment of mutual respect.
5. **Grades are earned:** You have to put in the time to earn the grades you deserve. Do not argue with your Lecturer about how deserving you are. Rather, if you are concerned about your grade, you may take the following approach: *'I'm concerned about the grade I received. I expected it to be higher and believed I followed the requirements. May we discuss exactly what I needed to have done differently?'*
6. **Deadlines:** Your Lecturer will give you adequate time to prepare for your assignments. This may be included in your course outlines, posted on OurVLE, and/or may be announced in class. It is your responsibility to follow these deadlines.
7. **Investment in your studies:** It is recommended that you review your notes before and after your lectures. At any point in time, your Lecturer may choose to give you a random quiz.
8. **Be on time for your classes and tutorials:** you cannot afford to miss the content of your courses, therefore it is expected that you will be on time for your lectures and your tutorials.
9. **Missing lectures/tutorials:** The University's regulation (*Student Handbook 2020-2021*, p.39), stipulates that: "All registered students are required to attend prescribed lectures, practical classes, tutorials, or clinical instructions. Students with unsatisfactory class attendance [who have been absent from the University for a prolonged period during the teaching of a particular course year for any reason other than illness] or who have failed to submit any assessments set by his/her Examiner, are subject to debarment by the relevant Academic Board, on the recommendation of the relevant Faculty Board, from taking any University examination. Procedures to be used to measure attendance and assessments shall be prescribed by the Faculty" (p. 39).
10. **Cell phone usage in class:** while in class, your cell phones should be on silent.

Peer-Peer Interactions

Social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram allow for rapid communication with friends, family and classmates, they also facilitate group participation through features that allow public access to discussion forums and posts. Below is a list of helpful suggestions that should allow seamless integration and navigation throughout group chats that are created with academic intentions.

1. Keep the group chat relevant- Academic group chats have been created for the sole purpose of discussing pertinent information relating to a specific course and quickly disseminating updates from Lecturers regarding content and deadlines. If your intended subject of discussion deviates from the collective academic goal of the course or if a message only relates to a specific person, it would be best advised to have such discussions in a private forum.
2. Be cautious of the intentions of the group chats with which you are involved- group chats that are comprised of students who have examination questions and are copying answers to course work from peers SHOULD BE AVOIDED. This type of collaboration goes against the University's policy on academic integrity, it is your responsibility to ensure that you are mindful of the group chats you are involved in. Breaching your academic integrity results in serious sanctions.
 - *If you notice throughout members' interactions that there is evidence of academic dishonesty, leave the group immediately. It is best to separate yourself from the situation as soon as possible. Find the appropriate group chat of students who are looking for genuine and acceptable assistance from their peers.*
3. Be respectful of others- Do not start a group conversation at night when everyone is probably asleep. You may want to establish an appropriate time with the group. Use appropriate language for public conversation and when referring to other members of the group chat. Expletives have no place in communication with classmates.
4. Be very mindful of your tone-The common saying: "It is not what you say, but how you say it", has even greater relevance in an online forum given our inability to interpret tone of voice in the messages that are sent. Stay clear of conversations that contain sensitive or controversial subjects, and as best as possible avoid conflict or escalating tensions through rude or impulsive responses. If a disagreement ensues, clearly state that you are happy to discuss the issue, but that a group chat is not the place. Then move to pick up the phone and have a conversation outside of the group chat setting.
5. Allow everyone an equal opportunity to participate in discussions or decisions that are relevant to the group.
6. Check messages for errors before pressing send- Under examination conditions, you are encouraged to check answers before turning them in; the same principle applies to group chats. Remember that you cannot take back your response once you hit send. Ensure that the message you send is the one you intended to send, before pressing send.
7. Be mindful when utilizing the services of class representatives- Each course normally has an assigned class representative whose main role is to advocate on the behalf of their fellow classmates by

facilitating communication between the Lecturer and students. While most class representatives eagerly have accepted the opportunity to act as a liaison, please be mindful that this is a voluntary position. They hold themselves to a particularly high standard and are willing to make every effort to ensure that students within the course are at ease, however they are not forced or compelled to meet individual demands. Approach class representatives with kindness and be reminded that they too have lives of their own.

Let us work together on becoming aware of and harnessing these soft skills as they can help us to succeed in the classroom and better equip us to enter and thrive in the workplace after graduation.

Sources:

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