

# Returning to nursing school? Keys to success

Preparation will help ease the transition.

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**C**ongratulations! You have decided to pursue additional nursing education and been accepted at the program of your choice. You're happy—right? But you also may be feeling a bit anxious, especially if you haven't been in school for a while.

To help ensure your academic success, take time to prepare for the demands that lie ahead. You can spare yourself much anxiety on your educational journey by:

- improving your technology skills
- becoming a better writer
- getting organized
- staying engaged.

These strategies can help ease your transition and lay a strong foundation for your success.

## Improving your technology skills

Today, higher education uses digitally driven approaches, including electronic textbooks, mobile computing, collaborative editing, and learning-management systems. That means you'll have to be tech-savvy to complete your coursework and assignments.

## Basic computer literacy

Students must have basic computer literacy skills—at least a beginning competency with word-processing programs, email, and electronic searches. Here are some ways you can hone your skills in these areas:

- Take a community-based computer course.
- Enroll in a workshop hosted by the

school you'll be attending.

- View online videos about computer skills, such as those on YouTube.com.
- Ask a tech-savvy friend or family member to give you a quick lesson or two.

If you'll be completing online coursework, get in touch with the school's tech support center in advance. Some schools offer free trial courses or orientation programs that give students the chance to practice course navigation, document retrieval, and form submission. (See *Digital literacy: Retrieving information online*.) The tech support center also can help you identify your technology needs.

### Electronic storage options

Plan for how you'll save important computer documents and files you'll use in nursing school. Your nursing program may offer personal electronic storage space on a network drive, allowing you to save files to the campus server. Such network storage offers advantages over a portable device like a USB or flash drive because in most cases, campus storage is automatically archived. USB drives, in contrast, are convenient but easily misplaced and susceptible to viruses and damage. If you decide to use a USB drive to save your files, protect it from damage during and after use and during transport.

Another storage option is a cloud-based service, such as Dropbox, Google Drive, or Microsoft OneDrive. Accessible from any device with Internet access, they offer cost-effective connection convenience, sharing ability, and archived storage. An Internet search can help you locate free or trial-based online storage options that you can try out to see if they meet your needs.

No matter what electronic storage option you choose, consider what techniques you'll use to stay organized. Come up with a simple naming convention for documents, and create computer folders with course names or numbers to use when saving files to prevent your computer home screen from becoming disorganized and cluttered.

### Computer security

Increased email and Internet use may make your devices susceptible to malicious viruses that can damage or destroy data on your computer. Be sure to take essential precautions to prevent disastrous loss of digital information. Use caution when downloading content from the Internet to a USB; rely on-



## Digital literacy: Retrieving information online

All students must have the skills required to retrieve information, whether online or otherwise. This means you need at least some degree of digital literacy. The American Library Association defines digital literacy as “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate digital information.”

Obviously, the Internet abounds with valuable information. But you also need to know how to locate, access, and evaluate other sources. These include scholarly databases, such as the Cumulative Index for Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), MEDLINE, and PsycINFO.

Become familiar with key nursing journals, most of which are now available online, and how to access them through your school's account. Consider touring the campus library, visiting the library's website, or talking with a campus librarian to get up to speed on information retrieval. If you'll be enrolling in an online nursing program, work with the campus librarian to identify available off-site resources.

ly on familiar and reputable sources. Also, install antivirus and Internet security software on all of your electronic devices; this software may be available free or at a low cost from your school. You can also purchase it online from stores that sell software or from antivirus companies. In addition, work with your campus tech support center on computer security issues.

### Becoming a better writer

Expect to do a lot of writing as you pursue additional nursing education. Before starting an essay, report, or other writing assignment, plan carefully. Read the instructor's guidelines thoroughly, and review the scoring criteria. Think about the major points of the assignment. We highly recommend that you create an outline, use ordered bullet points, or design a concept map to help





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you organize your thoughts.

Begin your paper with a topic or thesis sentence that states the purpose of the assignment; this helps you focus your efforts. At the end of the paper, provide a conclusion that summarizes your key takeaway points. Finally, allow adequate time for revisions. Revising is the key to good writing, so once you've made a first draft, expect to revise and edit it several more times.

### Writing resources

If you struggle with writing, look into your nursing program's writing resources. Many schools have writing centers or peer resources that can help identify your writing problems and offer editing suggestions. Distance-education programs may have online tutorial tools, such as Pearson Smarthinking service or eTutoring.org. If these resources aren't available, ask an experienced writer, such as an English teacher, to review your work for clarity, grammar, structure, and other problems. You also can explore apps or electronic grammar checkers, such as Grammarly ([grammarly.com](https://www.grammarly.com)), which detect errors. For a handy resource on grammar rules, consult Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. Or visit websites such as Grammar Girl ([quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl/](https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl/)), which give helpful tips on writing.

### Formatting and style guidelines

Some students struggle to format their papers according to specific standards and guidelines. Many nursing education programs use the American Psychological Association (APA) style guide to ensure consistent presentation of written material, including punctuation, abbreviations, headings, references, citations, and other elements.

Make sure you have access to whichever style guide your program uses, and familiarize yourself with it before classes begin. If, like many students, you find the

guidelines difficult to understand, you can get help from an online resource, such as the Purdue Online Writing Guide (OWL) at <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>, or online tutorials, such as [apastyle.org/learn/courses/index.aspx](https://www.apastyle.org/learn/courses/index.aspx). If you think you'll be using one of these resources, consider downloading the app or accessing the website in advance so you can practice before completing your assignment.

### Getting organized

As a returning nursing student, chances are you'll have to juggle the demands of school, family, and work. So planning and managing your time effectively is vital.

*If you're going to study at home, carefully protect that time for school work and don't get distracted by household chores.*

To record important dates and deadlines, use a paper planner or calendar or, alternatively, an electronic calendar, so you can set automatic reminders. We suggest you establish a study routine and build it into your weekly schedule.

Don't forget to schedule time for course readings and studying. It may be helpful to spend time every day reading over class notes, or accessing the learning management system so that content is reviewed regularly. Using this technique may help you avoid cramming for exams. Regular review also ensures you have time

to ask for content clarification from your instructor.

Find the best location for studying. Does your schedule allow you to go to a library or coffee shop for uninterrupted quiet time, or will you study at home? If you're going to study at home, carefully protect that time for school work and don't get distracted by household chores. Use a notebook or folder for each class to help you organize important papers.

Plan your studying activities and techniques around your unique learning style. For example, some students use flash cards to help memorize content. And while traditional index cards work well, technology-savvy students may want to use electronic flash-card applications, such as Study-Blue, Cram, Quizlet, or others. Some students find it helpful to highlight their notes, while others like to take notes about their course readings or rewrite their class notes. Consider your learning style and use the approach or techniques that work best for you.

### Staying engaged

During the first week of classes, carefully review the syllabi and course materials, including assignment guidelines, evaluation criteria and rubrics, and available course resources. Mark due dates and important assignments on your calendar. You might find it helpful to create a daily or weekly to-do list to keep track of important activities. You can record these lists on paper, in an app, or by setting reminders on your mobile devices.


Also take this first week to become familiar with school policies. Many programs provide you with a student handbook or have a web site that specifies rules such as an attendance policy, grade requirements, and social media rules. Refer to those guidelines, particularly if you're ill, can't attend class, or when preparing for a clinical experience.

Keep important school phone numbers and email addresses in your contact list so you can easily reach administrators and faculty. And be sure to check school communication daily so you don't miss important class or school announcements.

Strive to get involved with other students and the campus community as a whole. For example, take part in collaborative learning activities, such as study groups with other students. These activities can boost your motivation and enhance your understanding of materials while offering peer support.

Academic advisors and faculty members can make your back-to-school transition easier. Make an appointment to meet with your advisor when you start your program and periodically throughout your coursework. Research suggests proper academic advising promotes student persistence, enhances success, aids with the transition to school, and promotes appropriate decision making. Faculty members, for their part, can support your learning efforts, offer guidance on coursework, and serve as mentors.

### Ready for success

Returning to school may present many challenges. Planning your academic program appropriately can promote your success. Boosting your tech skills, honing your writing skills, getting organized, and staying engaged can make your return to school a more productive and enjoyable experience. 

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