Understand the Characteristics of Computer-Mediated Communication

Since you will use the computer to communicate your thoughts and ideas to others in our online courses, it is very important for you to understand a little about the type of communication tool the computer is. Here are a few characteristics of the computer as an interpersonal communication tool and some ways that these characteristics might affect your use of the computer to communicate:

**WRITING IS THE PRIMARY FORM OF COMMUNICATION.** It is imperative that the online student chooses appropriate college-level language and composition to use with assignments. Student email messages should avoid IM jargon, text, etc. Emoticons should be used appropriately and judiciously in email messages.

**ELECTRONICALLY COMMUNICATED IDEAS ARE INTENSIFIED.** The online student should realize that meanings, feelings, thoughts, and thinking and writing skills are intensified because of lack of physical human presence and non-verbal messages such as body language, vocal tone, and facial features. This means that a written message may have a more distilled or concentrated effect than originally intended because the receiver of the message does not have the benefit of seeing or hearing our non-verbal messages that contribute to the interpretation of meaning. For example, communicating "annoyance" without the non-verbal messages to gauge degree of annoyance may turn to anger and flaming in a computer-mediated atmosphere without the non-verbal modifiers.

**IN ELECTRONIC MESSAGES, MEANING CAN BE ATTRIBUTED.** Have you ever struggled to say exactly what you mean in an email message? Have you ever been misunderstood over email because someone misinterpreted your "tone" as "rude" because you sent someone a short, succinct reply? Do you know why it is easier to say something to someone face-to-face instead of emailing messages back and forth? It is because there are no non-verbal messages (gestures, eye contact), on a computer to give proper meaning to our messages. Instead, we sometimes use
emoticons or symbols like “lol” to give our email messages the proper tone. Because there is no non-verbal communication due to lack of physical presence, creating and assigning correct or incorrect meaning to messages is more difficult on a computer. As an online student, you must be wary of reading inaccurate meaning into the messages of others. This is called attributing meaning. As an online writer, you must work harder to create messages that reflect more accurately your tone of voice, feeling, intent, and your content. As an online writer, you must work harder to create messages that reflect more accurately your tone of voice, feeling, intent, and your content. Your ability to critically think and reflect that thinking in a scholarly way will be evident to the reader from your writing skills online.

ASYNCHRONOUS RESPONSE TIME CAN BE ADVANTAGEOUS.
Fortunately, when you communicate with a computer, you can take advantage of its asynchronous environment. Asynchronous means "not at the same time". In other words, in areas other than IM, Chat or real-time videoconferencing, you have the luxury of taking the time to think before you respond in writing because you are not communicating in real time (synchronous). Instead, you are communicating on your own schedule and you have time to think before responding and to choose language that communicates proper tone, feeling, and intent. This will help to minimize attributed meaning.

MESSAGES ARE IREVERSIBLE AND ARCHIVED: The online student understands that, once sent, written feelings, thoughts, ideas, etc. are irreversible, documented and in many cases, archived. Taking advantage of the asynchronous response time afforded by most computer-mediated communication the student may decrease the number of poorly worded or regrettable messages sent in haste.

INTERACTION FACILITATES LEARNING: A good online student understands that interaction is the primary way that learning takes place via the computer; takes full advantage of the online presence of other people and resources; does not lurk, and is polite and respectful to others and is prompt in responding.