

Top 10 Tips for Teaching Seniors How to Use a Computer

I've been teaching library computer classes since 1997. Here are my top 10 tips for teaching seniors how to use a computer.

1) State the goals of the class before you begin instructing. People will come into a class with different skill levels. Advanced students will often work ahead or surf the web if the class material is too basic for them.

This can distract you and other people in the class.

After everyone in the class has been seated, I introduce myself and then say something like: "Just to make sure we're all on the same page here, this the Introduction to Email Class". In this class we cover the very basics of sending and receiving email messages. Is that why we're all here?"

2) Use real life parallels whenever possible.

For example, if I'm describing the "To:" box on an email screen, I'll hold up the front of an envelope that has been addressed.

This really seems to help to "Demystify" computers for seniors.

Another analogy that seems to go over very well is comparing web pages to electronic documents. I'll hold up a People magazine page and state that web pages are really just magazine pages that you can read on a computer screen.

3) Use humor to lighten the mood. This is especially important if you are much younger than the people that you are teaching.

Many seniors seem to feel ignorant (or worse!) because they can't use a computer like their 10 year old grandchildren. This being the case, they can really feel intimidated by a younger instructor.

I usually begin a class by stating: "Nobody was born knowing this stuff". I then segue into the story of my father getting whiplash from teaching me how to drive a standard shift.

4) Emphasize that if they learn 3 things from an hour long class then they've done really good. Many seniors that I have taught over the years seem to be trying to make up for "lost time" by frantically trying to learn everything at once.

5) Speak slowly and take frequent pauses to make sure everyone in the class is following what you're saying.

6) In my experience, hands-on instruction seems to work best. I'll describe what the class is going to do (such as starting a web browser and visiting a particular web site). Then we all do it together.

7) Use positive reinforcement. Say things like: "That's an excellent question. Thanks very much for asking it."

8) Emphasize that "practice makes perfect --- or at least almost perfect --- when it comes to learning how to use a computer." I then return to my learning how to drive a standard shift story stating that what was once so difficult is second nature to me now.

9) The "strange neighborhood" analogy also seems to work well. I'll ask the class: "What do you do when you drive into a strange neighborhood? Do you floor the accelerator and start making random turns? Of course not. You proceed slowly and follow directions. That's the golden rule for learning how to use a computer."

I'll then add somewhat dramatically while gesturing to myself: "And if you get lost, you ask somebody for help."

10) I like to hand the class notes out at the end of the class. If I hand the class notes out at the beginning, people tend to thumb through them and not pay attention to what is being taught.

Seniors also seem to relax quite a bit when I tell them that class outlines will be handed out later. They *really* seem to appreciate having something in writing.

Once seniors are able to relax and have realistic goals about what they can learn in one class or session, they seem to both enjoy the computer instruction and get more out of it.