



Starting and Sustaining an Online Teaching Career in 2019

by [Jennifer Lebedev](#) and [Annemarie Fowler](#)

The landscape of education has changed dramatically over the past decade. Many of us are teaching online either part time or full time, which allows greater flexibility and freedom. However, teaching independently comes with a different set of responsibilities and demands. What are they and how are they best managed?

Our names are Jennifer Lebedev and Annemarie Fowler, and we are independent English teachers. Our experience online encompasses private lessons, group classes, blended courses, videomaking, blogging, and other digital content creation.

The online world can be difficult to navigate, but we can attest to the benefits of ongoing networking and professional support. Staying in touch with our peers allows us to learn about new trends, gain advice, and collaborate on projects. With more and more teachers making the transition online, it's a good time for a candid discussion about the realities of being an independent online teacher.

Our session related to this topic at the TESOL 2018 International Convention drew much interest, with standing room only. The number of attendees packed into our room speaks to the growing interest our colleagues have in online teaching opportunities. Here, we'll share the basics of starting an online teaching career, along with tips for effectively sustaining that career over the long term.

Getting Started Teaching Online

Getting started in online teaching is not as challenging as it used to be. In fact, today it is easier than ever with a wealth of tools, resources, and platforms that facilitate engaged communities and meaningful student-teacher interaction.

That said, there is a tendency to believe, "If you build it, they will come." In other words, if you launch a website, share a few YouTube videos, or create an online course, you will immediately have a full teaching schedule without much time or effort. Right? Think again.

Teaching independently and building your own practice come with the ongoing responsibilities of running a small business. If you do not wish to take on marketing, scheduling, and payments, you might join an existing platform that recruits teachers and offers a built-in audience.

Whether you join an online learning community or build your own, you will have to learn to brand yourself and build a following. Students have an endless choice of teachers and online courses. Your brand is what will help them choose you. One of the best ways to begin this process is to ask yourself what unique value or perspective you bring to online teaching. Clearly communicate who you are and what you can provide. Then prepare to meet the constant demand of creating your materials for your followers, which will include a mass audience as well as private students paying for your services.

Choosing a Platform

Teaching online allows for a combination of live classes, blended courses, and asynchronous teaching. Live classes will most likely be your bread and butter, but the ongoing asynchronous interaction will help you build your following, so both formats are important. Popular platforms for live classes include [Skype](#), [Zoom](#), and other web conferencing sites. Options for hosting courses include [Thinkific](#), [Teachable](#), [WizIQ](#), or a membership-based platform on your own website.

For private lessons and paid courses, you will need to consider the logistics of the information exchange. Screen sharing eliminates the need for handouts, but students may still wish to have a copy of a lesson plan. They also need a means to submit assignments and receive your feedback. File sharing options include [Google Docs](#), Skype, [Dropbox](#), email, or a private Facebook page.

Social media, with the exception of streaming, is asynchronous. It may be tempting to create a presence on all available platforms, but there is no need to be everywhere. Decide how best to use social media for your community or niche. Loyal followers will visit your different social media accounts, so make their visits worthwhile by offering varied content and different tasks. Keep in mind that you will need to post regularly and respond to comments to establish trust, so do not overextend yourself. The average online teacher can spend at least 1–2 hours every day on social media and email. Are you ready for that commitment?

Finding Students

You have different options to build your online following, and this is where you can really have some fun. The key is understanding your niche. Once you know who you want to work with, start to identify where they are online and how to best engage them.

Consider our different paths:

Jennifer: I started teaching on [YouTube](#). I found my first private students from among my viewers. I built [my website](#) a few years after coming online. I decided to open accounts on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#) much later. Even now, YouTube remains my main platform.

Annemarie: I began with a handful of private students, a blog, and an email list. As traction with my blog grew, I added accounts on [Facebook](#), plus a [YouTube](#) channel. [My website](#) and email list continue to be my where most of my students find me.

Whatever path you choose, keep your end goal in mind and find balance. This goes back to the responsibilities of running a business. Providing free content is essential for building your community and establishing trust, but you will also need to consider what numbers you need to hit to meet your income needs. Do you need to gain a certain number of private students to fill your weekly schedule? How many courses are you running and how many seats do you need to fill?

Generating Original Content

The online world never stops. You can keep up with it by establishing a regular posting schedule. This will also set expectations among your followers. Most YouTubers and bloggers post at least once a week. Posts on other social media should also be regular, but they do not have to be daily. Quality and consistency take precedence over frequency. Remember that every post creates an impression of you, the teacher.

Look at the learning experience from the receiving end. If a dedicated follower visits your different platforms, is there a chance for language practice throughout the week? Consider making connections between posts for continuity. For example, a photo shared on Twitter or Instagram can be reused on Facebook, but accompanied by a different task. YouTubers often use social media for previews and postlesson tasks. Older videos can be shared again through social media along with new practice tasks.

Recycling is a great way to make use of all your content and make sure new followers are familiar with your work. Here are some examples:

- Annemarie used an idiom from a [lesson on ordering coffee in English](#) for this [engagement post on Facebook](#).
- Jennifer's posted a YouTube [vocabulary lesson on foot motions](#). The video was [shared on Facebook](#) with a short practice task. Then on Simor.org, Jennifer shared [a free interactive quiz](#) to review the vocabulary.

You must find a balance between free and paid content. Not every piece of content can be monetized, but every online post is a chance to extend your reach and build your brand. You need to keep your commitments to your paying students, but do not neglect the needs and expectations of your general following.

Effective Ways to Create and Sustain an Online Presence

In short, we have four recommendations: be consistent, deliver on promises, stay true to your brand, and find a balance between the wants and needs of your community.

Be Consistent

Building a relationship with your community comes with time and your continued presence. Though you do not need to be on every social media platform, it is necessary for your audience to know what to expect from you and when—for example, they should know that you share a video on YouTube every Tuesday or air a Facebook Live video on Fridays. Communicate that schedule to your audience and stick to it.

Deliver on Your Promise

Maintaining your community's trust and loyalty comes with knowing that they will get the results they want from working with you. Be careful of buzzwords and instead tell students exactly what they can expect to accomplish with you and your services.

Stay True to Your Brand

Always remember who you are as a teacher. Trust in yourself. You will get criticism from time to time. Not everyone will like you or your style. You need to take criticism in stride and carry on, believing in what you do and knowing you have support from your regular followers.

Create Balance Between Needs vs. Wants

Pay attention to what your core group likes. Stats will inform you. You can also poll students and take requests. Let them have input. At the same time, remember what you have learned from training and experience. They may ask for idiom after idiom or a long list of phrasal verbs. They may also want to know how to learn English in 6 months or less. Find the balance between what learners ask for and what you know they need.

So, Is Teaching Online Worth It?

Absolutely, yes. Though not without its challenges, teaching online creates a wonderful opportunity to combine an entrepreneurial spirit with your passion for connecting to students through English language teaching. Maybe it is time for you to see what is beyond the traditional classroom and discover what more you can offer as an online teacher.

Jennifer Lebedev is an independent online teacher who offers private and group lessons. She began teaching English in 1996 and eventually became a teacher trainer and the program coordinator at an IEP in Boston. Having published vocabulary and grammar materials, Jennifer continues to blog for Pearson on WordPress. Since establishing herself as JenniferESL on YouTube back in 2007, she has gained more than 700K subscribers, and her videos have had over 75 million views.

***Annemarie Fowler** launched **Speak Confident English** in 2014 to help women overcome feeling shy in English so they can communicate freely, move forward in their careers, and feel comfortable in a new English-speaking country. She offers online courses and private training. Throughout her 20-year career, Annemarie has grown from an ESL/EFL teacher to an academic coordinator and teacher trainer, to the deputy director of a language college in Washington, DC. She has an MA in TESOL from The New School.*