

How to Return to School in Your Fifties

Returning to some form of higher education around age fifty can be a gateway to increased skills for re-entering the workforce, improve one's competitiveness if trying to move onto other challenges, and/or trying to acquire knowledge for...

Method 1 of 3:

Determining If You Should Go Back



Make a list of the skill or knowledge set you want to gain. To do this, you need to ask yourself a few questions. Are these for a new job, to change position with a company you already belong to, and/or to add to your competitiveness in the future? Answering these questions now will help match you to a suitable college and program.^[1]

1. Research skills that are in demand in your workplace if you're seeking to move within your own place of employment. Your own human resources contact may provide you with this information.
2. Pay attention to in-demand skills outside your workplace if you're seeking employment elsewhere from your current environment. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education is one starting place for information: ^[2]

2.



Consider what paths you may take that would require degrees. The career choice you are planning to make, especially if it's something to move into more complex areas of the workforce, will usually require a more advanced degree.

1. Are you looking for research-intensive skill paths such as medicine, law, computers, engineering? Those require classroom instruction and supervised practical exercises--so you will need schooling.
2. Are you looking for financial or business training for career paths in banking or investing? Higher level positions in those industries require a college or even graduate degree.

3.



Consider what paths you may take that may not require degrees. Keep in mind there are a number of cases where going back to school may not be the right option for you given your career choice. [3]

1. Some work fields will train you themselves without schooling elsewhere, or use online/correspondence training. Pharmacy technicians, financial clerks, real estate, law enforcement, and fitness training are just a few of the positions you could consider for employment without a

degree.

4.



Establish if your schedule can handle family, work and/or school. Will the additional time commitments placed on you by classes and schoolwork be a problem if you have existing family and work responsibilities? There are flexible schedules available at most colleges/universities that students in their 50s can take advantage of.

1. After you've selected a college and program, if you are unable to handle a full-time load of classes, determine with your program's advisor how much time it will take to complete a degree with a part-time schedule.
2. Some classes are offered in multiple time slots, so this may create some flexibility.
3. Distance Learning/Online classes also may be an option to increase schedule choices. These will require computer/internet access.
4. Consider discussing your educational needs with your family members and employer if you feel comfortable. You may be able to arrange an alternate schedule with them that allows you time to attend classes and study. Some employers offer incentives or funding for educational advancement--consult your human resources contact for more information.

5.



Overcome your fear of the lecture hall. There are many students in their 50s or older that attend classes in person. Being away from the classroom environment for years should not deter you from pursuing higher education regardless of your reason for doing so. Seeking more competitive skills and/or knowledge is not exclusive to any age.

1. Make sure whatever school you choose is flexible and accommodating in scheduling for adult students specifically.
2. Many colleges/universities will have quite a number of adult learners, so you should not feel "alone" even if you may be the only one in a particular class.
3. Whether it's a class of 20 or 200, don't be afraid to participate in a class. You are all there to learn.

Method 2 of 3:

Picking a Program



1.

Select the school/program that matches your needs. If you're trying to gain employment or change jobs, make sure whatever school you select will have programs that fulfill those requirements.

1. There are several news magazines that have school rankings, but it's best to make sure the one you pick actually has a department and faculty that cover what you want to do. A local college in your area may be just as suitable for business training and far easier on your schedule than a national university. In your 50s, you want to pick a school that is going to meet your lifestyle needs.
2. Consider vocational/community colleges for an associate degree or certificate training. These are usually faster degrees, approximately one or two years of course work depending on your class load. If you are in your 50s, this may be a better option especially if you're already working or need to return to the workforce sooner. ^[4]
3. Thoroughly explore the website/program listings of the colleges you're interested in. See if they have classes you can use. Be aware that sometimes classes on the books are not always offered every semester.

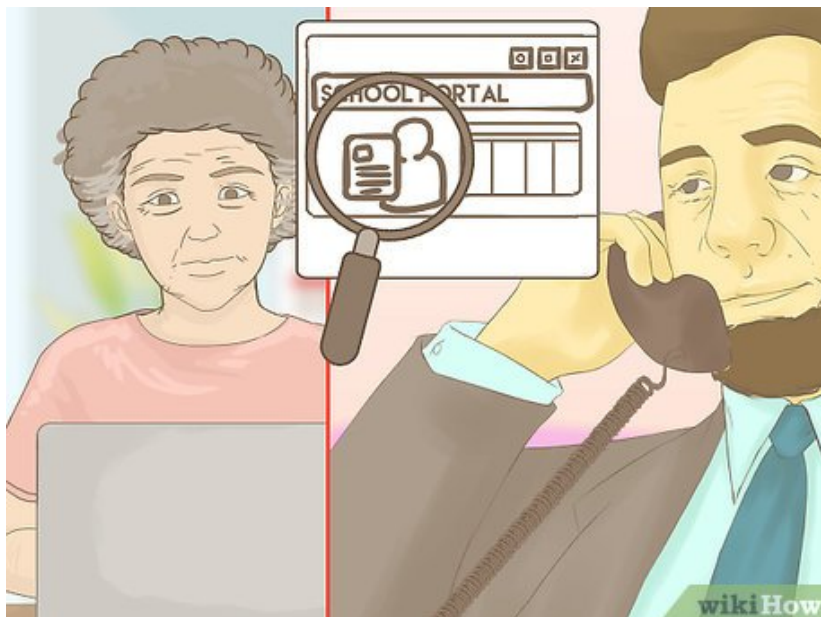
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Check for instructors that cover subjects/skills you are interested in. Whatever type of school you select, within your program's department, most colleges will have a specific department page along with specific faculty pages within each department.

1. Look up the professors/instructors credentials to see if they have sufficient background in the fields you're going to study.
2. Most faculty should have a curriculum vitae, the academic version of the résumé, available. See if they have at least some publications, teaching experience, and/or work experience in the areas you are pursuing.

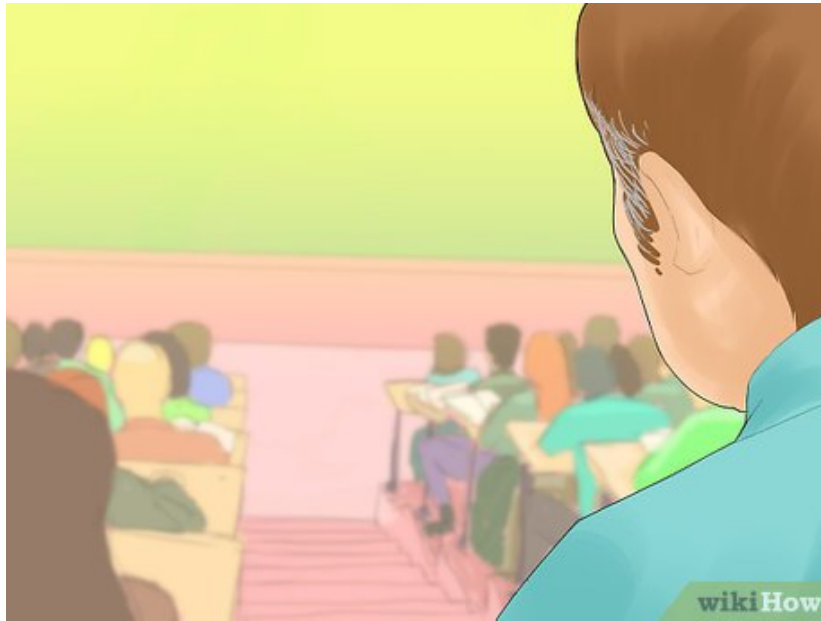
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Contact the program. It's a good idea to e-mail or call the program you're interested in to make sure they will accommodate adult learners and flexible scheduling. This is a good opportunity to also find out about degree requirement details beyond what's listed on the program website.

1. Be polite, and remember you are likely one of many students contacting this individual or office on any given day.
2. This may be a good time to inform your program contact that you are an adult learner. In your 50s, you might be able to contribute experience and knowledge to the program beyond the traditional student--something you could bring up if applicable.
3. You should consider coming up with questions before-hand--especially about the program of study, degree requirements, and schedule options.
4. If you are uncertain if you are dealing with Ph.D.s (doctor of philosophy), you should address the faculty members as "Professor."

4.



Visit the campus if practical. If you can arrange a physical visit to the school, that would go a long way to improving your chances of attending classes in person. Not counting online schools/classes--a campus tour is usually available at most colleges/universities at regular intervals. Contact your prospective college's main office for more information.

5.



Determine if you can afford it. This is a significant factor in going to any college regardless of age. If you are already employed, your employer may provide funding for some specific educational training. Otherwise, you will have to find other financial means. Besides paying out of pocket--there are Federal loans, private loans, grants, scholarships, and work-study programs. ^[5]

1. Fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) [1]. All Federal financial aid eligibility is determined first through FAFSA. It can be completed as early as January 1st of the year leading up to enrollment (so for students entering school that same Fall/Spring). The earlier it's completed, the better your chances for funding.
2. There are several other types of specialized aid including for the military, AmeriCorps volunteers, education tax credits, foster care youths, etc... available through the U.S. government's official site: [2]
3. Grants and scholarships will require you to apply to specific groups, usually with thematic projects in mind. They will provide funding over a specific term--frequently 1 or 2 semesters--and expect some manner of academic achievement from you in return. This will vary from program to program.
4. Work-study, as the name suggests, pairs the student with employers in exchange for direct funding to scholastic needs. As a person in their 50s, you will have a great deal of experience to offer for this option.

Method 3 of 3:

Managing Schoolwork in Your 50s

1.



Create a routine. Once you select a college, program, and classes, your class schedule will loom large in your daily and weekly life. Figure out how much time you need for any reading, writing, homework, etc... on a regular basis and set that time aside from your other daily duties.

1. If you have family and work tasks, you might let your family members and co-workers/employer know of your educational needs and arrange changes in transportation, completion of chores, shift assignments, etc... In your 50s, this will likely be among your most difficult challenges upon going back to school. Using scheduling tools, electronic or written, may be a good idea.
2. Be prepared to adjust this task balance semester to semester as class schedules change.
3. If it's ever a challenge to meet your scholastic requirements, then talk to your professor(s) to see if you can reach some alternate arrangement about your workload or schedule. Don't wait, do this as early in a semester as possible.

2.



Go to class. Whether it's physical or online, there's no substitute for attending class. Taking notes, participating in discussion, and getting feedback are unique experiences each and every class. You should come prepared to most classes for a mix of lecture and discussion, though every professor's style will vary.

3.



Participate! If the class turns into a discussion or professor is asking a question you know enough content about to answer--raise your hand or submit to the forum (for online classes).

1. Taking part in a class full of 20-somethings can be intimidating in your 50s. But remember, you're there to learn just as much as they are. And they may benefit from your life and work experiences out of the classroom.

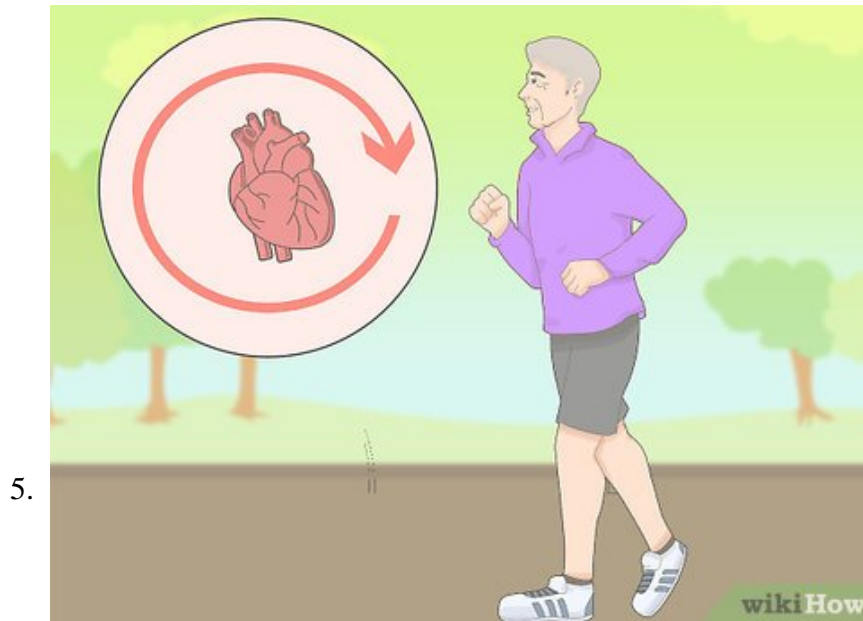
4.



Get help when you need it. Don't be afraid to ask your professor/instructor for assistance if you're struggling with a concept or any other aspect of your classwork.

1. See them during office hours and as early in the semester as possible to avoid problems. If you cannot make their office hours, you can usually contact them for appointments at other times.

2. If you need additional tutoring, many colleges have tutoring centers for each subject field. If you can't physically make it to the tutoring center, the college may be able to give you contact information of reliable ones you can hire for help.
3. Take advantage of study groups formed by others in your classes, even if they are younger than you.



Maintain your health. Whether you're in your 50s or 20s, keeping up your health is essential for a successful academic term.

1. Eat healthy. Keeping up a sensible daily eating regimen is a good idea for energy and alertness during classes, and during studying. It's easy to forget to eat when in the middle of an assignment or juggling class times. This issue is no less important in your 50s.
2. Exercise. Some regular physical activity will help with energy, alertness, and maintaining focus for assignments and classwork--half an hour of jogging or similar activity each day.
3. Take breaks. Take 15-20 minute breaks for every hour or two of work you're doing on studying. This will help rest your eyes from being strained, avoid headaches, and give your mind a chance to refocus on the material you're handling.

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