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How to Go Back to School

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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley also does a blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her musings on careers, finances, and how to save on shampoo.*

I'm thinking about going back to school. But I'm going bonkers second-guessing myself. Should I finish law school, study web design for the Internet, or enroll in an intensive writing program? Should I attend face-to-face classes on a local campus or participate in an online program in my bathrobe and bunny slippers? Should I go for a fourth degree, get a certificate, or become a noncredit student? On top of that, I ask myself, why on earth am I would I wish to subject myself to hitting the books and taking exams with an already chock full schedule? Thank heavens for Serena Williams. Yes, Serena Williams.

As I was struggling with my back-to-school issues, I happened across an article detailing Williams' foray into the classroom. Already a bazillionaire from playing hardball tennis, Williams has enrolled in a 240-hour program at the Palm Beach Nail School in Florida. Believe it or not, Williams is learning how to be a manicurist. "Not only do I plan on being the top graduate from my nail school, but I also intend to be the most fashionable," Williams told People magazine.

But what on earth does Williams' move have to do with me? To me, racquet means a lot of noise. But Williams is my new inspiration. If the world's number-one female tennis star can return to the classroom to master skills way outside her current field, so can I. And so can you. In this era of nonstop downsizing, popular thinking is that millions of laid off Americans need to get retraining to have any hope of ever landing another high-paying job. Data from the U.S. Department of Labor indicates that most lost positions are never coming back, thank you very much, now that organizations have figured out how to march on without you. If picking up a new trade appeals to the survivor in you, here are some steps:

Forget your age. You may assume that only recent high school graduates go to college or vocational school. Wrong. The average age of today's undergraduate is over 30.

Apply for loans. To nudge people get out of unemployment lines, the federal government is funneling more money into retraining Thank you, President Barack Obama. I suspect you sneaked in a few extra bucks for practical adult education while everyone else was arguing about health care.

Start small. If I were you, I would begin with a noncredit course at a community night school. Why worry about grades when you're just sticking your toe back into the learning pool? These programs, usually taught by people interested in marketing themselves, always abound with fascinating classes on topics ranging from Introduction to Songwriting to Intermediate Polish.

Consider community college. According to Dr. Jill Biden, wife of U. S. Vice President Joe Biden and a former teacher at Delaware Technical and Community College, two-year institutions offer great bang for the buck. I agree. The cool thing is that if you choose to continue for a bachelor's



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degree at a prestigious four-year university, no one knows or asks where you spent your freshman and sophomore years.

Focus on hot industries. Despite today's rotten economy, openings still exist in trendy fields involving the environment, health care, and higher education. Avoid, at all costs, spending time and money on classes without relevance to the job market. Liberal arts topics such as English Literature and Art Appreciation, for instance, are fine for 18-year-old undergraduates. Not for you.

Study what you love. In my view, getting pumped up for another career offers a unique opportunity to choose a job of real interest, even though your loved ones may think you have lost your mind switching from, say, accounting to poop scooping. Ignore them. If you have always wanted to work with the aging population, for instance, now is the ideal time to study geriatrics.

Befriend your teachers. Engineering, journalism, and accounting professionals tend to know other folks in their fields. Duh. Network heartily with them. Who knows? You may soon be on the teensy-weensy list of people who have gotten jobs so far in 2010. Alas, most organizations are so frightened about the continuing sluggish economy that they still have not resumed hiring. Can you say unending recession? In my view, that's the best reason of all to spend the next year or so hanging out on a school campus, any school campus.

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.