

Tips and Guidelines to Online Learning

General Guidance

- While many staff and faculty are relying on virtual communication, they remain available to support students. We really do encourage you to communicate your needs while you are away from campus. This could include questions you have about class, health issues, non-academic challenges, and so on. Both faculty and staff anticipate hearing from you.
- If you are uncomfortable putting particular information in email form or would just like to talk to someone face-face, consider requesting a phone or video call. If you are requesting a call by email, suggest a few time options in the initial message.
- Check your email often (at least twice per day), as it will continue to be the University's primary means of communication.
- Be an active participant in digital communication. It's okay to send a follow-up message if you have not received a response after 48 business hours. (Place a phone call if it's urgent!) When you do receive a response, make an effort to confirm your understanding. As with in-person communication, if you are not sure, ask!
- In addition to sharing information, emails also convey tone that can either add or detract from your message. Adopting some structure in your messages can provide clarity to the reader. Consider utilizing the following:
 - Introductions (e.g., Hi John, ; Dear Prof. Nguyen, according to the addressee's preferred level of formality)
 - Appropriate punctuation (e.g., avoid run-on sentences)
 - Avoid using "text talk" and shorthand
 - Make clear, respectful requests: When composing your message, consider that the reader may not share your concerns or urgency. Be mindful of how you make requests and convey your expectations.
 - Sign offs. At the end of your message, include a sign off such as, "Best", "Take care", or something similar to signal the end of your email.
- Keep emails concise.
 - The subject of your email should be descriptive and brief (e.g., "Question about Homework 3")
 - Longer emails are difficult to synthesize and can delay your response.
 - Effective emails should not be longer than a paragraph or so and should quickly get to the point.
 - If you are having trouble keeping your email brief, consider arranging a phone or video call.
 - Before sending, check that your email contains: your name, a greeting, the reason for the message, appropriate language and punctuation, and a clear closing.

Plan your time

- Choose your preferred tool for keeping track of your to-do list, due dates, and schedule. It does not matter if it is a mobile app, wall calendar, or bound paper agenda. The important thing is that it is a format that you will actually use. You might consider whether it would be helpful to keep your schedule somewhere that is visible to your family or roommates so that they know when you are likely to be unavailable.
- Review each of your original syllabi and watch for communications from your faculty on changes to due dates, assignments, and exams. Update your calendar accordingly. Block out class sessions and other time-specific obligations, write down deadlines, and create phone or sticky note reminders for important tasks
- Normally, you might keep a semi-regular schedule that includes things like going to the library several nights per week. Do you really know just how much time you spend on coursework, though? Figure out how much time you typically need to devote to each class (HINT: at least 3 hr/1cr) and account for when you will need extra time for major assignments or exams. Write this information out in a way that makes sense to you, and use it to draft a daily and weekly task list and schedule. Be realistic about how much you are able to accomplish in one day, and build in extra buffer time when you have big assignments due.
- While class times and other meetings may have a predetermined time, it will be up to you to define the structure of much of your day. Once you know how much time you will need to devote to your coursework, think about the best time of day for you to do that. Depending upon your living arrangements, you should consider the schedules of others in your house or apartment.
- Schedule time to spend with family and friends, even if it is over the phone or online. There are a few reasons to do this. First, knowing that you have made time for relaxation and socializing will make it easier to focus on the task on hand when you need to be reading or studying. Second, it will signal to your friends and family that you have considered their needs and schedules and that you care about them, but that you also need to prioritize your coursework.

Discuss schedules, boundaries, and expectations with your family or roommates

- Whether you are living at home with your family or with other students in a house or apartment, you should sit down and have a discussion about how you can help each other with this adjustment. Try to have this discussion prior to the start of online classes.
- Prepare for this discussion by constructing an outline of the amount of time that you will need to devote to coursework and the types of tasks you will be doing. For example, will you sometimes need quiet space so that you can engage in online class discussions using a speaker and microphone? Your family or roommates will be better able to support your learning if they are aware of your needs.
- If you are living at home with family members who work or are also in school, consider working during the same hours that they do to help remove the temptation to socialize when you intended to be studying. If other family members are also working from home, plan ahead to share technology resources or favored working spaces.
- If you are living in a household with young children or others who require care, be sure to clarify with the rest of your family who will be responsible for providing that care and at what times.

Prepare your study space and state of mind

- Keep your learning materials handy. Make it easy for yourself to attend class or complete assignments. Keep paper, pens, chargers, and other materials all together to make work convenient. If possible, keep a dedicated space in your home set up with these materials ready to go. If it's not possible to keep a dedicated space, then keep everything together in a box or backpack, and treat that as your mobile home office.
- Do you need quiet space to engage in online classes? If you cannot escape background noise in your home, remember to mute the microphone as needed. Keep a notecard handy stating that class is in session, and make it visible to others in your living space.
- You should develop habits around your state of mind as well. Get dressed for an online class just as you would for an in-person class. Take a few minutes before each class session to think about what material will be covered that day and what questions you may have. You might normally do that while you walk or ride the bus to class. That's a great habit, and you should try to maintain it as an online learner. If you have trouble shifting your focus away from goings-on in your apartment or with your family, try quiet breathing exercises as you sit down to study.

Stay connected to friends and University resources

- Find ways to stay connected with friends and classmates. If you always eat meals with the same group when you're on campus, try having a regular group call while you eat so that you can catch up and support each other. Designating a time for these chats will also help to keep you focused during your scheduled work hours. Lean on your friends for social support, but also work to keep each other accountable to your goals and priorities.
- Check with your faculty about whether they encourage similar online interactions for class study groups. They may be open to ideas about how to engage students in their coursework and support their success during this time.
- While it may take some time—especially at first—for offices to be able to return every email or find out the answer to every question, we still encourage you to reach out and ask for help when you need it.
- Be patient with your faculty as they work to reformat their courses and address any unforeseen issues that are likely to arise, but be sure to email or call (as directed by each faculty member) when you need clarification or feel that you are missing information. Don't wait till the last minute!

If you find that you are having trouble creating or sticking to a structured schedule, think about keeping a time diary. Write down just how much time you are spending on various activities each day. If the results show that you are spending too much time watching TV, for example, then this will help you to be honest with yourself and to align your daily activities with your priorities and goals.

Additional reading about being a successful online learner:

- [Strategies to getting the most out of an online class](#), (A blog post at Northeastern University.)
- [Six Time Management Tips for Online Learners](#), by Tamar Shulsigner. (A blog post at Northeastern University.)

Important Links

- [Important Academic Dates and Deadlines](#)
- [ARC and Graduate Studies Petition Forms](#)
- [University Coronavirus Updates](#)
- [Student Toolkit](#)