

Virtual Classrooms and Online Learning

Remember, even though you are taking courses in a digital space, you are still in a classroom. If we were in person, you would not be laying down, in your bed, in your pajamas. You can be comfortable, but you should still be presentable and alert. Below are some tips to help you navigate this online space.

- **Finding the Right Space:**

- Pick a space that is not busy. You do not want people or animals walking through the background of your screen while class is taking place.
 - Find a space where you can sit that is plain – situate yourself in front of blank walls or use a plain theme/background to block out a busy wall behind you.
 - Lighting – do not sit directly in front of a window – the light streaming from behind you makes it difficult to see your face and hurts everyone else’s eyes.
 - Sit at a desk – do not sit in or lay down in your bed.
 - Work at a table or desk – sitting up at a table will help to keep you alert and allow you to organize your materials for easy access.
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- **Communicate Extenuating Circumstances:**

- Instructors know that this semester is particularly challenging and that extenuating circumstances may arise more frequently than normal. If you are experiencing difficulty, especially with circumstances related to Covid-19, be sure to communicate that information as early as possible and explain succinctly and clearly what you are struggling with and what it means for you.
 - Make sure to let professors know as soon as possible if you are unable to acquire the equipment or Internet access required for online learning.
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- **Extensions:** if you know you will need a possible extension on an assignment due to extenuating factors, communicate with your professors as soon as possible. Be clear about a reasonable date that you can submit the work by. Do not make a demand.

- **You might say something like**

Dear Dr./Professor _____, Due to (explain extenuating circumstance), it will be difficult to complete (insert assignment) by the due date. I know that I will be able to complete the assignment to the best of my ability by (insert new possible due date). Would it be possible to submit the assignment on that new date? If not, and if you are willing to provide an extension, what date might work for you. Thank you for your consideration. Sincerely _____.

- **Self-directed learning:** many of you will be taking asynchronous online courses, meaning you will have to work through content on your own on a specific time schedule. This task can seem overwhelming, especially if you feel you don't understand the concepts.
 - **Maintain a schedule:** going from in-person to exclusively online courses means you have a lot more self-directed time. Many of your courses may not have stable meeting times. It is important to keep your time structured, especially when working from home. There are a lot of temptations – your bed, pets, television, food, family, etc. I advise you to maintain a routine with waking up, going to bed, and with work time in between.
 - **Use a planner:** if you do not already have an agenda book, calendar, or planner, I suggest you get one. It will be vital that you record all due dates in the same location to keep track of them, especially as they change from what a syllabus might have originally dictated.
 - **Do the work** – just because you don't have to physically show up somewhere doesn't mean you don't have to do the lessons provided for you.
 - **Take your time** – take each lesson one step at a time. Don't skip steps. Go slowly. It can be a good idea to skim the full content quickly to get an idea of what you are in for and how long it will take, then go back and work through each step carefully.
 - **Write down questions** – as you work through new material, write down questions as you go.
 - **Don't give up** – our first inclination when we feel overwhelmed is often to give up. Fight that urge. Stick with it – you likely understand more than you think.
 - **Ask specific and directed questions** – don't be afraid to email your professors and ask questions, just make sure that they are specific. The more direct and clear you are in your questions, the easier it is for the professor to assist you.
 - **Instructors aren't robots** – instructors will have an influx of emails to deal with, especially in this first week or so of moving online. Give a professor at least 2 full business days to respond to your question.
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- **Video Chats:** you will likely have to meet in a digital classroom with your professors and classmates. You might also utilize video chatting with professors if you have questions. Semi-formal video chats are actually a great way to practice for online interviews, which are becoming increasingly more common. Video chats can work nicely if everyone is on the same page. Try these things to help make the session go smoothly for all parties:
 - **Double check your equipment** – issues will arise unexpectedly, but you can try trouble shooting beforehand to minimize those issues. Make sure that you know

how the software works, that your speakers are working, and that your camera is working well before signing into a meeting.

- **Alert professor to potential limitations** – if you the equipment you are using is older or perhaps not the best tool for online discussions (for example, a smartphone vs. a computer; slow Internet connection), let your professor know ahead of time so they can help you come up with a game plan in case you can't login or get booted out of the chat due to technical issues.
 - **Keep your email open** – keep your email open and refreshed in a separate tab. When something goes awry, which it will, your professor will likely send an email out to you and/or the class.
 - **Set up in a quiet space** – noise that happens around you will project into the chat and make it difficult for others to hear or pay attention.
 - **Set up in front of a neutral background** – try to find a plain wall or something not too busy. You don't want to distract from what you are saying with a hectic visual background.
 - **Look presentable** – at least in terms of what is visible to others.
 - **No food or pets** – eliminate these kinds of distractions that make it difficult for all parties involved to stay focused.
 - **Nod along** – it can be difficult to know if a person heard you or not, especially when there can be lag time. It can also feel isolating for a professor to talk without the kind of non-verbal feedback that often happens in person. If you are on screen, nod from time to time to indicate you are listening and on the same page.
 - **Online discussions:** if you are meeting together with your class in the same digital space at the same time, remember that it takes a bit longer to read and write than it would to speak and listen, so keep the following items in mind:
 - **Responding:** When typing responses in real time, keep them succinct. Don't worry too much about spelling and grammar, just try to get your idea out on the digital page so others can read and response.
 - **Stay alert:** online, typed discussions can be rapid because so many people are typing at one time and people have different processing and typing speeds. When you are "in class" virtually, do not leave the physical room – you will miss too much and have a difficult time filling in the gaps of what you missed.
 - **Speaking:** when the professor tries to have a group discussion aloud in an online space, pay attention to how the professor requests your response – there is often a "hand raise" button that they may want you to hit so they can call on you. In some cases, they may leave it open for people to chime in – in those cases, don't be afraid to speak up. It feels like speaking into a void, but trust that others are there and processing your thoughts so they can respond.
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- **Help yourself:** This is actually a great time to practice your self-sufficiency and problem-solving skills.
 - When you have a question about software, before asking the professor, go to the software/website's help page. Often, the answer is there waiting. Also, there are often live chat features or quick response email teams ready to answer your specific question.
 - When you have a question about the course or assignments, first check the syllabus, then the course website/Canvas, then check in with classmates. Try not to ask questions that the professor has already answered in the syllabus or course materials.
 - Confused about an assignment – try it first before for help. Trying it will help you to pinpoint your exact struggles when you do ask the professor or Tas for help. Being specific when you ask for feedback on an assignment will make it easier for the instructor to help you.