

Planning for Success in Remote, Hybrid, and Online Classes

For classes meeting remotely

On days when you'll meet via Zoom or some other web-conferencing program, do your best to have a place where you can be focused and comfortable. I know this can be hard, especially for those of you who are at home, sharing spaces and technology with the rest of the family, but doing so will enable you to get more out of the session. Keep in mind that comfort (sitting up on your bed) might not result in focus!

If you are at home, look for a quiet place so it will be easy to focus. This might be a closet! Lots of journalists have had to do this for their work over the last few months, and it can work for you too!

Sitting at an actual table or desk really helps. This makes it easy to access to your computer, textbook, notes, etc. When I decide to work in the living room, I have a portable card table that I use, for example.

Do your best to have decent internet access. Last semester, some of my students told me they'd go to parking lots on campus or to a campus nearby to access the Wi-Fi. They'd sit in their back seats for "class," and if they had Bluetooth in their cars, they'd let that sound system pump out the sound. Be sure to let your instructors know if you do NOT have a good internet connection and might need to turn off video or might be seen logging in repeatedly because you've been dropped.

Keep unneeded apps and windows and tabs closed. I know the temptation—I do it myself during some Zoom meetings—but it's easier to resist if you don't see the program open on your task bar.

If your professor gives you the chance to stand up, move or take a break—take it! The brain can process only what the butt on the chair can withstand. Plus, it resets your attention span and will freshen your memory capabilities a bit.

I know you'll be at a computer or on your tablet or phone, but there is SO MUCH research that shows that note-taking on paper helps you commit information to memory better than taking digital notes. This is because of the way your brain works, and you're not going to change that hardwiring. So, notes on paper mean less studying in the long run.

For online classes

My new-to-online students tell me this is the single most helpful piece of advice that I ever give them: If your class is 100 percent online, schedule it into your life in two to three blocks of 60–90 minutes each week like you would an in-person class. And make yourself "go to class" during those times. Be consistent. Don't move that time block around. If you finish up your work for the week before your time blocks are used up, great! Take a literal break from school—you earned it.

If your professor uses Blackboard calendar or provides a schedule, download or print it (or both) and use it as a checklist so you don't forget important course details.

I recommend that you keep your own calendar—a Google Calendar, an Outlook calendar, any app you like! Put in the big and little things—all things count in a course. Let it buzz your phone to remind you of due dates and to keep you from procrastinating.

For any class

Remember that regardless of whether it is your first semester or your last, this is not a “normal” semester. There are lots of new stresses, and even if you aren't too worried about staying healthy, somewhere in the back of your brain, avoiding getting the virus, staying healthy, and hoping your family stays healthy could be causing you stress. With that in mind, you might have to do different things to keep your routine, especially if you're living at home and not on campus or in an apartment. A different routine makes it easy to make mistakes you wouldn't normally make.

Consider keeping all your school stuff in one place, and keep it there consistently so you don't misplace it and end up stressed about that. This doesn't mean you can't work on the back porch or at Starbucks, but as soon as you are back home, put your stuff in its place. I had to take this advice myself—I kept losing things between my home office, the kitchen, the covered back porch, and the living room. Now I have three milk crates in the office where stuff goes: one for classes I'm teaching (books, binders, folders); one for committee work (notebooks and folders); and one for all my supplies. My crates stack up neatly, and I can keep the cats out of them. Find what works for you!

If you aren't sure about something in the course, ask. Many online courses (and hybrids that use Blackboard) will have an “Ask a Question”-type discussion board—just email the instructor. Be sure to check the syllabus for the answer first, and be aware of what your professor's policy is on answering emails (some don't check on the weekend, for example), but by all means ask.

Talk to your peers. Find out what has and hasn't worked for them. If this is your first semester in college or your first time in an online course, ask classmates who are more experienced with online and hybrid classes. They will have good student perspectives on what worked and didn't work. Many of your instructors haven't been students for a while.

Closing thoughts

Be forgiving of your instructors, your peers, and yourself this semester. While some faculty on campus have been teaching online for a long time, for others it's a brand-new experience. They are learning to navigate this new world just like you are. This is the same for your classmates; some are old hands at online learning, and for others it's a brave new world. So give yourself a break. You aren't the only one stressed out and making mistakes. We're all in this together. Remember this as you, your classmates, and your teachers work to learn online: a deep breath, some kindness, and a little patience can go a long way!