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Student's Guide to Remote Learning

Adjusting to life during a Pandemic

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Our challenge

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the university implemented emergency remote teaching starting on March 23, 2020. Students are now back home—some in different time zones—and expected to continue learning, with their teachers quickly adopting new technologies and methods to keep courses going. It is a tremendous challenge for all of us! This guide aims to help you as you navigate these difficult times.

What's in this guide?

- Take care of yourself and others
- Manage your time
- Master the tools
- Deal with pitfalls
- Stay connected



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Take care of yourself and others

We are all anxious due to the drastic changes in our lifestyles and the worry about our loved ones getting sick. You may find it more difficult to concentrate and have less drive to work and study. Acknowledge it, talk to others about it, and be patient. If you get sick, let your instructors know. If you are falling behind, ask for flexibility and advice: professors want to hear from you and help you. Contact your classmates, and ask how they are coping: social distancing applies only to the physical, not the virtual connections!

Resources

- GW Students Well Being, <https://students.gwu.edu/wellbeing>
- CARE Network, <https://students.gwu.edu/care-network>

Manage your time

As a college student, effective time management is something you likely struggle with, even in the structured setting of on-campus learning. It will be a so much harder with teaching moved online, so use some of these tips and be intentional about your time.

Make a schedule

On campus, your daily interactions with classmates often remind you of tasks you need to accomplish: “hey, did you start homework 4 yet?”—oops, you’d forgotten homework 4 was assigned. Now, you have to manage without those cues. Maybe some professors are holding class meetings on video streaming, but record them and post the video, so you let yourself sleep late to catch-up later. But do you? *Make a schedule!*

The age-old tools for scheduling are pen and paper. Draw a table with week days as columns and time blocks as rows, and enter both scheduled (a.k.a., synchronous) activities, and assigned tasks (readings, homework). Remember: you should be working at least two additional hours, for every hour of scheduled instruction. Time-block for all your courses, and also rest and entertainment.

Use the Pomodoro technique

This technique is very effective to help you win the battle against procrastination! It works like this: set a timer for just 25 min to work without allowing yourself to be distracted, then take a 5-min break (for social media, exchanging texts with a friend, having a snack), and then repeat. After 4 cycles, take a longer break (~30min).

- Read about it in Wikipedia¹
- Watch a video of the fantastic Prof. Barbara Oakley from her course “*Learning How to Learn*” <https://youtu.be/bDz7bUor51c>
- Look for an app to replace a timer; e.g., *Focus Keeper* for the iPhone (screenshots on the right).



Master the tools

Your professors are likely trying new tools to continue instruction online, and at first it won't be pretty. But you and they will get better at it, so be patient! You will need to master a few tools that may vary by course.

Webex

A video-conferencing system designed for business settings, it has been adopted for live video lectures because GW has a subscription. Your instructor may schedule video calls in the tool, and invite students, which will trigger an email to you with a calendar invitation (.ics file you can download or double-click to automatically add the meeting to your calendar app). Your TAs may also use it for virtual office hours, and send you a link to join

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique

them at scheduled times. And you can use it to meet with classmates for study groups! Go to: <https://gwu.webex.com/> to get started.

Pro Tips – Always mute yourself as you join the video call, and only unmute when you wish to speak. This avoids many noise problems (especially if you are typing!). It's also better if you use headphones. Use the chat feature for quick responses to short questions by the instructor. Meetings can be recorded: ask your instructor to record the sessions, if they haven't suggested it. The recordings become available on the Webex site after a few hours, and can be shared via direct link.

Some professors may choose one of these alternatives to Webex for video-conferencing:

- **Big Blue Button** <https://bigbluebutton.org/> – Open-source software.
- **BlueJeans** <https://www.bluejeans.com/> – No free tier!
- **Google Meet** <https://meet.google.com/>
- **Jitsi** <https://jitsi.org/jitsi-meet/> – Open-source software.
- **Zoom** <https://zoom.us/> – Caution: data security and privacy practices in question.²

Other collaboration tools having video-conferencing features (and more):

- **Blackboard Collaborate Ultra** <https://us.bbcollab.com/>
- **Microsoft Teams** <https://aka.ms/mstfw>

Blackboard

GW's institutional learning management system, Blackboard is integrated with the Registrar's Office database, and is the default course platform across schools. Some instructors may choose not to use it, so always check the course syllabus.

Go to <http://blackboard.gwu.edu/> to find your courses using this platform.

Open edX

SEAS hosts a course platform for open courses (i.e., anyone can enroll and follow them), currently being used for computational courses. Find it at: <https://openedx.seas.gwu.edu/>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_Video_Communications

Deal with pitfalls

Recognizing the stumbling blocks you could face will help you cope and plan workarounds. One common difficulty for students now is **competing for technology**: with parents working from home and siblings also learning online, just finding a quiet space is a challenge, never mind sharing wifi bandwidth or devices. Post your schedule on the fridge and talk to your family to coordinate time blocks so you can join that video lecture and work uninterrupted when you need to.

- **Abstain from multi-tasking!** Use the Pomodoro technique and commit to focusing on one task for 25 min stretches. Multi-tasking can crush your productivity.
- **Beware the illusion of competence!** Watching videos passively gives you a false sense of confidence (similar to sitting through a “clear” lecture). Engage actively with the content, taking notes (electronic or on paper), pausing to retrace arguments or exercises, and writing down questions. Then post questions for the TA or instructor.
- **Avoid cramming!** Learning is best through spaced practice.

Stay connected

Find out what is each course’s main communication channel: is it email, a chat app (like Slack), a discussion board, other? Then be sure to stay tuned to incoming messages. If your instructor communicates via email, you can set a filter to get those messages automatically sorted from your inbox (for example, with a folder for the course). If your instructor uses Slack, make sure to set push notifications on your devices so you do not miss anything. Check these apps regularly, at least twice per week.

Join online office hours, use the online Study Halls, and request one-on-one meetings with LAs or TAs for your courses. All of these are happening on Webex. Take advantage of these opportunities to stay on top of things! The hardest part of online learning is staying motivated, focused, and engaged. It helps quite a lot if you stay connected with your classmates and professors. Post in your courses’ communication channels more often than you did before, and interact with each other.