Strategies for Online Learning & Accessibility

As classes have moved online and many students are self-isolating during the COVID-19 pandemic, we encourage you to develop new strategies and flex your strengths to complete your assignments and prepare for tests and exams.

As always, make sure you check your UTmail account and announcements made by your professors on Quercus or other online platforms.

If there are disability-related concerns impacting your academic work, please connect with your Accessibility Advisor/Consultant.

For an appointment, call

- UTM: 905-569-4699 or email: access.utm@utoronto.ca
- UTSC: 416-287-7560 or email: ability@utsc.utoronto.ca or
- ST. GEORGE: 416-978-8060 or email: accessibility.services@utoronto.ca

Table of Contents

Transitioning to Online Learning

- **"Show up" to class**
  - Treat online classes like an in-person class: set dedicated time each week for each online lecture. You may be tempted only to review lectures right before the exam, but learning takes time.
  - Take notes on online lecture content like you would in class. For example, put concepts in your own words and illustrate ideas with examples. Create your own practice questions and summarize course content as you review.

- **Stay up-to-date and familiarize yourself with your learning platform(s)**
  - With in-person courses shifting to online, it's important to check your email and Quercus daily for updates as there may be important changes to your courses. You will want to stay up to date with this information. Schedule a time to do this admin work.
  - Devote time to navigating the online platform. Ensure you know where all resources are located. If you can't find something, ask questions. If you have the opportunity, try writing a practice test on the platform to get a sense of what your online test will be like.

- **Test yourself**
  - Create flashcards using apps like [Anki and Quizlet](#)
  - Use the library old exam respository to review practice questions, or homework questions to test your knowledge
    - [St. George Old Exam Repository](#)
    - [UTM Old Exam Repository](#)
    - [UTSC Old Exam Repository](#)
  - For problem-based disciplines that usually have tutorials - like Math, Statistics, Computer Science, Physics, Economics, and Chemistry - schedule time each week to complete practice problems, problem sets, or homework questions. If you get stuck, review the lecture content and your textbook to find possible solutions and utilize online discussion groups and forums to get and give support.

Take Charge of Your Time and Take Breaks

- **Be your own secretary and manage your time**
  - In addition to scheduling time to attend online classes, set dedicated time aside each week to review lecture notes, practice problems, create flashcards, and work on assignments. Without the regular structure of in-person classes, use a schedule and an agenda to structure when you do your work.

- Schedule downtime, relaxation, exercise, and social time and prioritize self-care.

- **Begin your work earlier (and keep a back-up!)**
  - Online classes may pose unique barriers (e.g., technical difficulties, additional time needed to communicate over email, using new software, etc.). Expect that these new challenges may take some extra time to overcome.
  - Keep a back-up of any work you have uploaded. Technical glitches can happen and it's important to keep an archive of your past work.

- **Minimize distractions**
  - Studying in an online classroom can mean easy distractions on your computer, on your phone, or at home. Minimize distractions by using website blocking apps or focus apps (like [StayFocusd or Freedom)](#) and log out of your social media accounts while you attend your online classes.
  - Choose a quiet study space when attending online classes.

- **Reduce screen time, if needed**
  - Online learning can mean a lot of time spent using a computer. Identify class work that can be done away from the screen. For example, write a first draft of your essay on paper then type it up. For readings, you might print a hardcopy, use a text-to-speech app, or download them to device that is kinder to your eyes.
  - Take short, regular breaks from the screen (e.g., 5-minute break for every 25 minutes of work or a 10-minute break every hour). If you have received medical advice to limit screen time, set a timer to ensure you take breaks at the recommended intervals.

Participate in Online Learning

- **Engage with others online**
  - If online discussion groups and forums are available on platforms like Quercus, Piazza, or Top Hat for your courses, ask questions and discuss topics with your peers, your TAs, and your instructors.
  - If you need to get in touch with your instructor directly, find out which mode of communication they prefer (e.g. email, phone, etc.)
  - Build community. If you have a recognized study group or friends you like to review course material with, keep up with this practice through phone or video calls or group chats. Working remotely doesn't have to mean working in isolation.

- **Strategies for online discussions**
  - Review the discussion instructions. Are you:
    - Posing a question? Critically commenting on one of the readings? Writing a reflection?
  - For critical discussions, start by asking key questions about the text:

- What is the central **claim** or **thesis**? What is the supporting **evidence**? Why is this claim **significant** in the context of your course/discipline? Are there any gaps, shortcomings, or **limitations** to the argument? Is there a **counter-argument** that can be made? How does this text **relate** to something else you learned about in this course? For a critical discussion post, you might aim to engage with just a 1-2 of these questions.
- When writing a reflection: Relate your thoughts and reactions to the text or lecture material.
- When posing discussion questions:
  - Aim for open-ended questions: will your question start a conversation or debate? Can you imagine many different responses?
  - Avoid self-evident or simple yes/no questions as these shut down a discussion
- When answering questions, think about the *why* and back-up your stance or perspective with course material or related examples.

Master Online Tests and Take Home Exams

- **Practice Online Tests and Exams**
  - If your course does not offer online practice tests, check your course textbooks to see if they contain links to online practice tests.
  - You can also search for multiple choice, short answer, and matching quizzes in various disciplines on flashcard apps like Quizlet.
  - Practice previous exams posted on the University of Toronto Libraries websites. While old exams do not include answers and cannot be completed online, they can be a useful a study aid and offer an opportunity to practice what you have learned. Please keep in mind that old exams are simply one of many study tools: exam questions and sometimes even course material changes from semester-to-semester.
    - UTM Old Exams Repository
    - UTSC Old Exams Repository
    - St. George Old Exams Repository

Writing Online and Take Home Exams

  - Review the format of your upcoming tests and exams. Be mindful of the time allotted for your take home exam. Some take home exams may only be open for a few hours while others may be open for a few days.
  - If your exam is only open for a few hours, prepare for this exam as you would for an in-person exam. Take some practice exams under the same time constraints and practice your recall of information.
  - If your exam is open for a few days, treat this exam like a final essay. Try to do some preparation or research before the exam is released on potential topics you could write about. Take some time to do an outline before you start writing and editing after you finish your rough draft.

- Check your computer. Make sure you have all the necessary equipment and software to write the exam when the time comes.
  - Familiarize yourself with the online platform hosting the online exams and ensure that you have the correct link and log in information prior to the start of the exam.
  - If you do end up experiencing technical issues during the exam, contact your instructor and TA as soon as possible with as much detail as you can provide (e.g., time of error, error messages, and screenshots)
  - Review the technical aspects of the online testing platform: Can you move between questions and sections? Is there a timer or time limit for sections of the exam?
- Prepare a summary sheet of important information for your exam – this helps when you are studying as you are synthesizing course information. For open book exams, this can also serve as an easy reference sheet (confirm which aids or materials are allowed prior to the start of an online exam).
- Check to see the specifications of the exam. Will you have access to the internet or other software?
- If you have questions or concerns about how your test and exams accommodations will be implemented for your take home exam, connect with your Accessibility Advisor/Disability Consultant
- If you need a computer for online learning, some University Libraries have a loan program in place for computers. More information regarding availability and instructions can be found [here.](#)

Stay Motivated

It can be difficult to find motivation or stay motivated to complete work and prepare for tests and exams when you are engaged in online learning and self-isolating.

- **Reflect on your strengths**
  - Reflect on your past and current successes, name your strengths and find motivation in the things you know you do well
- **Chunk tasks and set a timer**
  - When faced with a lot of academic work, try breaking each academic task into smaller, more manageable steps
  - Set a timer for 5 minutes and attempt the first step on your list. After the timer goes off, you may want to take a short break. Follow that up with a longer stretch of work time – slowly build up your capacity to do work
  - If you are still getting stuck, try increasing your dopamine by listening to music or engaging in physical activity right before you attempt the first step on your list
- **Work in shifts**
  - Some students like the Pomodoro method of studying: studying for 25 minutes and then taking a break for 5 minutes, then repeating
  - For many *neurodivergent* students, traditional Pomodoro (25-5-25-5-25-5-25) may not work. Try mixing up the shifts of work and make sure you take a break within an hour of studying

- o Reward yourself for completing work. Start small by rewarding small accomplishments and then work up to longer shifts of work.
- **Take a break from the news**
  - o It is important to keep up-to-date on what's happening in the news. But manage those distractions by checking updates and notifications less frequently and after completing some academic work.
- **Be kind to yourself**
  - o It is not easy to stay motivated during challenging times. You are doing the best you can and it is important to manage feelings of guilt, which can lead to more procrastination. Break your work into small steps and tackle one thing at a time. Stay connected with friends and family through the phone or video call.
  - o Prioritize self-care, sleep, healthy eating, and movement.
  - o Celebrate your successes and name your strengths on a daily basis.

Build New Skills for Online Learning

Connect with a learning strategist remotely (by phone or online) to develop study skills for online learning:

University of Toronto Mississauga

- Academic Skills Centre

  To book a phone or online meeting with a learning strategist housed at Accessibility Services, please contact our front desk at 905-569-4699 or access.utm@utoronto.ca.

University of Toronto Scarborough

- Academic Advising & Career Centre
  416 287-7561 to set up your phone or online appointment
  Email aacc@utsc.utoronto.ca

St. George Campus

- Academic Success Centre
- Appointments can be booked with learning astrategists on CLNx.
- Email: mail.asc@utoronto.ca