Adjusting to online learning and taking online exams

Making the transition to online learning is stressful for everyone. This resource contains strategies you can use to adjust to this new mode of learning as quickly and smoothly as possible.

As a result of moving to a fully online environment, you may be experiencing a number of changes and challenges, including:

- Studying at home with family and roommates around, or living alone and feeling socially isolated without your usual social interactions
- Trying to focus and stay motivated despite increased distractions and stress (academic, personal, health, financial)
- Changes to course evaluation methods and having to rapidly adjust to a different mode of learning
- Staying on top of changes to course delivery as well as university policy updates.

To keep up with academic policy or course changes, continue to check course updates on Quercus, school email, and the COVID FAQ pages for updates. If you need assistance, try to reach out to talk to someone about your academic, financial, or personal matters. We are here to help!
utsc.utoronto.ca/registrar/covid-19-information-and-updates
utsc.utoronto.ca/studentaffairs/program-service-updates

Differences between online and in-person courses

If you have not taken a fully online course before, you may notice some key differences from traditional in-person courses. Online courses offer flexibility and convenience, but you may find online learning to be more difficult compared to in-person learning as it may require extra time for studying, completing assignments, and monitoring your own learning. In addition, students can easily fall into the procrastination trap. Unlike what many believe, procrastination is not the result of a lack of willpower; relying on willpower alone could lead to poor results. To work towards your academic goals, try the following strategy: **Building good habits + Setting specific plans = Success**[1]

Here are specific tips on how you can develop good habits and study plans to do well in your courses.

Maximize your study time

- Try to implement a 3:1 ratio (study 3 hours for each lecture hour per week). For example, if you have a 3-hour lecture per week, set aside roughly 9 hours per week to watch the lectures, read, and complete your assignments.
- Avoid marathon studying and instead study in 30-minute chunks to avoid becoming fatigued. Be sure to take regular breaks: stretch, walk or do a short meditation. Try to avoid using your phone during the short breaks.
- Pause towards the end of your 30-minute study block to connect the concepts to real life examples, compare and contrast ideas, self-test, and ask "how "and "why" questions to explain the concepts.

Establish a regular daily routine

- Although you can watch online lectures at any time, setting specific times each week to watch your lectures will help you to keep up with the pace of the courses.
- Use the Daily task planner (uoft.me/taskplanner) to establish a regular weekly routine and add specific times for course readings, assignments, and other responsibilities. Mark your final exams in your calendar.
- To stay focused on your daily tasks, take a couple of minutes in the morning to review your schedule. At the end of the day, review the tasks you completed and shift the uncompleted tasks to another day.

Master the art of "single tasking"

- We all have a limited amount of attention and cognitive resources. When attempting to multitask, people end up switching their attention between tasks because they can only devote their cognitive resources to one task at a time.
- In one study, students who multitasked (messaging while reading) required twice the amount of time to complete their reading compared to the student who just focused on reading. In addition, dividing their attention lead to problems with learning and memory recall. [2]

Design your environment for success

- Proactively create plans to deal with obstacles, distractions, and temptations by using "If …. Then…, " statements. In a research study, removing these challenges increased self-control and reduced the fatigue that students felt. In turn, students were more likely to achieve their study goals. [3]
- Phones are one of the biggest distractors, so turn the notifications off and keep it out of sight.
- Create obvious visual cues. For example, keep your study plan nearby as a reminder to start studying.

Create a plan and set specific intentions

- Write an implementation intention when you are setting your study goals.
  "I will (insert behaviour) on (date) in (place) at (time). E.g., I will read and write notes for chapter 9 for PSYA02 for 1 hour, on Wednesday in my room at 11 am.

Put yourself to the test

- Match the conditions when you study to the conditions of your test; this will improve your ability to recall the information during the actual test. For example, create your own test questions or use textbook questions to test yourself. Set a limited time to answer the questions to simulate the pressure you would feel during a test.
- Actively recalling the information you learned strengthens your memory. [4]

Distribute practice

- Instead of cramming just before the exam, space out your study sessions for your courses. For example, if your test is a month from now, space out your study sessions about a week apart. When you forget some of the details, you work harder to reconstruct the information from your memory. This "desirable difficulty" will deepen your learning.
- Mass practice (cramming) gives you the illusion of knowing but may lead to blanking out (forgetting learned material) at the test. [4]

Switch up the topics

- Instead of studying one concept at a time, switch between multiple concepts/types of problems from your course. This will improve your critical thinking skills (compare and contrast the concepts and see the "big picture").
- In problem solving courses, this strategy improves your ability to identify the correct strategy needed to solve the problem which is essential in test performance. [4]

Preparing for open book exams

- Do not fall into the trap of, "I could look up the information during the test, so I don't need to study." If you rely on this strategy, you will likely run out of time looking for the answers.
- Create study notes (mind map, summaries, and charts), add page numbers from your notes/text, and add tabs with labels so you could easily find the information. [5]

Taking online exams

- Choose a quiet space and minimize distractions/interruptions.
- Get organized by checking your Wi-Fi connection early and gathering resources (computer, power cable, notes, textbooks, summary notes, paper, pencils, and a glass of water).
- Check with your instructor and ask what tools are allowed/not allowed and whether you need to provide citations.
- If allowed, stay on the exam website and open another tab/window to look up information (e.g. lecture slides).
- Create backups: copy and paste answers into a Word document just in case your internet glitches.
- Take snip/screen shot of answers you submitted for your records.
- Tech issues? Contact your instructor right away and report. [6]

References

1   Clear, J. (2018). Atomic habits: An easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones. Penguin.
2   Dindar, M., & Akbulut, Y. (2016). Effects of multitasking on retention and topic interest. Learning and Instruction, 41, 94-105.
3   Milyavskaya, M., & Inzlicht, M. (2017). What's so great about self-control? Examining the importance of effortful self-control and temptation in predicting real-life depletion and goal attainment. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 8(6), 603-611.
4   Brown, P. C., Roediger III, H. L., & McDaniel, M. A. (2014). Make it stick. Harvard University Press.
5   www.lib.sfu.ca/about/branches-depts/slc/learning/exam-types/open-book-exams
6   Take-home and online exams, Academic success, Student Success Centre, University of Toronto