

# Making it work... at home

Studying for exams in a time of global pandemic brings unforeseen challenges. Whether you're working from your bachelor apartment or your family's kitchen table, **we are here for you.**

Working in less-than-ideal circumstances is challenging! But don't despair. Many of our recommended strategies for learning and studying remain effective. The academic skills specialists at SASS have compiled this compendium of strategies to help keep you focused and motivated.

## Before we begin

A sudden shift to remote instruction can create both anxiety and pressure. Even in the wake of this crisis, professors still want you to learn, to enjoy the course, and to do well. This hasn't changed.

The best thing that we can all do right now, other than staying home, is **communicate**. Contact your professors and TAs about time pressures, due-date pressures, grade anxiety and communication anxiety.

Many of us are fighting hard for a sense of normalcy; we want things to go back to how they were. But this pandemic is changing and will change the way we move, build, learn, and connect. As you adjust to this new context, **begin by focusing on food, family, friends**, and maybe fitness. Devise a strategy for online social connectedness with a small group of family, friends, and/or neighbours (see [strengths-based actions to connect, from a safe distance](#)). Stay in touch; support each other.

Once you have established the basics, you can start to make the necessary **mental shift**. [Ignore the people who are posting that they are getting tons of work done](#); ignore the people who feel they will never work again. They are different people, on different paths.

**Don't compare yourself to others; just compare yourself to yourself.** You don't have to feel pressure to be anything you're not. These are challenging times. Check in with yourself every day and adjust your study plan accordingly. You'll get more done some days than others, and that's okay.

**You are doing what you can, and that is enough.**

Notes:

- To support student success in light of the challenges posed to the Queen's community, two new [academic adjustments are available](#): late drop and pass/no-pass.
- Student Wellness Services has put together a resource to [support students working remotely](#).
- If you have accommodations, please consult [the QSAS site for details](#).

# Working efficiently and effectively from home

Keep up your old routine as much as possible. Think about what was working for you and take on the parts of that routine that are still realistic. For example,

- **School is still your full-time job, even if you're working in less than ideal circumstances.** That boils down to [8-10 hours / course / week](#).
- Maintain a **routine**:
  - If possible, "attend" classes at the same times, on the same days. If this is not possible, work when you can, focusing on 2-3 courses each day.
  - Between your "classes," do homework and work on assignments.
  - Aim to have consistent bedtimes and wake-up times.
  - Eat meals at regular intervals.
  - Get dressed and ready for the day. You can still wear comfortable clothes—even switching from "night PJs" to your "day PJs" (or otherwise comfy clothes) can help.

Having a routine takes some of the decision-making out of your day and can increase your confidence. Working with a realistic schedule, for the situation you're in right now, can be encouraging! You *can* do this.

It's important to have a **balance between work and other activities**. Consider:

- Doing your most challenging work first, before less difficult or in-depth tasks.
- Do your work before relaxing. Earn your reward; you'll feel better about it.
- Take short, frequent breaks:
  - Work for up to 50 minutes at a time, with 10-minute breaks every hour. If 50 minutes is too long, do what you can.
  - Work for a maximum of 3 hours at a time, and then take a break for an hour or so.

Short and long breaks, combined with work before reward, gives you a sense of accomplishment at regular intervals, supporting your motivation.

# Set up your schedule

SASS offers two types of schedules. Either or both may be helpful for you, depending on your context: the [weekly schedule](#) and an [exam study schedule](#).

SASS also has many more [strategies on how to study for exams](#).

Part of setting up a schedule is **informing the people you live with about your intentions**. What are you working toward? When are you not to be disturbed? When do you need quiet? When are you planning to take a break? How can you all work together to support your schedules?

## Control how you use your time

What do you need to get done? What are your priorities? Look at the big picture first, and then narrow it down to what you need to do each day. See:

- [End of term planning chart](#) (break down and track completion of final course tasks)
- [Time management matrix](#) (determine which tasks are priorities)
- [Assignment planner](#) (break down large writing assignments and schedule steps)

## Effective study habits

### Set up your space

Make sure the place you study is **used only for studying**. This is one of the things about libraries that works for a lot of people. You go there to *work*—not to sleep, not to hang out, not to watch movies.

- When you're working from home, this separation of activities can be more challenging, but still achievable. During work hours at least, your work spot (e.g., desk, table) is transformed into a work-only zone. Make sure the place you use for studying is exclusively for studying during "work hours."

#### Context matters:

- Find a space with natural light if you can. Natural light will help boost your mood and motivation.
- Set a comfortable temperature.
- Choose a somewhat comfortable chair. Not too soft!
- Have everything you need at hand: computer, notebook, notes, flashcards, pens, etc.
- Remove the things you do NOT need: phone, chat windows, hobbies, etc.

## Study well

### Organize the course material meaningfully

- Identify the main concepts of a course; look at the course syllabus and description, and textbook chapter titles or lecture topics.
- [Make summary sheets](#) for the main topics in a course; select content for these from your lecture / reading notes.

### Elaborate

- Elaboration helps you make the material that you're studying meaningful. It's a way to go beyond memorizing to applying and analyzing. For example, explain the relationships between two or more concepts; analyze an idea/concept for its component parts.

### Solve problems

- Work through problems and then review related concepts or theories. Spend about 20% of your time reviewing concepts and 80% of your time doing problems.
- Each problem is part of a family of problems where each procedure is a variation on the underlying concept. Use the course syllabus, lecture topics, and/or chapter headings to identify the main concepts of the course.

### Self-test

- Self-testing helps you identify what you don't know. It improves your memory by requiring you to recall specific information. Include some self-testing every time you sit down to study rather than saving it for last.

These study strategies and more are part of [the study plan](#). Download [the exam study schedule](#) and consult the resource on [how to use three-hour study blocks effectively](#).

## Avoid procrastination (as much as possible)

**Build activities into your routine** by pairing something you want to do (e.g., writing for 20 minutes) with something you already do (e.g., drinking coffee). **First**, do the thing you would like to do, and **then** do the thing that you would normally do immediately after.

Connect with friends and classmates online to form a **study group**. We recommend about 25% of your study time should be spent studying (virtually) with others.

**Plan what you will do when procrastination tempts you by writing** down the things you might do to avoid working (e.g., vacuum, watch YouTube), and then write down something you will do *instead* (e.g., schedule a different time to vacuum and put it in your calendar, then do five practice problems). When you think about procrastinating (e.g., vacuuming instead of studying), do the alternative thing you've written down.

## Clarify your goals

It's easier to spend your time intentionally when you know **what matters** most to you. There's a lot going on right now, so start by reminding yourself of what's most important, academically. Then, focus on that.

Goals are **most effective** when they are:

- specific
- realistic (can you achieve this goal with your resources, time, etc.?)
- measurable (how will you know when you've achieved this goal?)
- given a timeline
- written down and reviewed as needed.

For more on goal setting, see SASS's information on [time management](#).

## Reduce distractions

**Avoid multitasking.** This means that when you're working:

- your phone should be off and out of your reach
- you're not checking social media
- you don't have any chat windows open
- you're not watching a show or movie in the background
- you have a clear sense of what you're working on and for how long (e.g., "I want to work on the problems at the end of Chapter 12 for the next 45 minutes").

**Wear headphones.** Some students find music (even if it is instrumental) distracting; you may prefer white noise or café noise to help your ability to focus.

Here are just some of the available options: [Rainy mood](#), [Celestial white noise](#), [Design your own white noise](#), and [Coffitivity](#). Headphones also act as an effective do-not-disturb signal to yourself and to those around you.

# Online exams

## Open book exams are still demanding

Knowing the course content well will improve your chances of doing well. Even if there isn't a timer running, the types of questions you will be expected to answer will focus on analysis and application of information you should already know and understand.

- Use the course learning objectives (and, if available, weekly or unit learning outcomes) to organize the material.
- Create unit or weekly summaries of the course content. Focus on the key concepts and how they are organized, connected, and related. Summaries come in all types of formats: 1-2 page "cheat sheets" or [study notes](#); concept or mind maps to visually represent the information; summary tables to compare elements and their attributes, etc.

## Organize your materials and notes

Don't rely on your ability to find information that you need while you are writing the exam. To best prepare, create your own study and reference notes by using charts, graphic organizers, concept maps, or reference guides to organize main topics, themes, and information.

- Reviewing for the exam will also build your familiarity with the course material. If you need to double-check something during the exam, make sure you'll know where to look.
- As you create your summaries, keep track of lecture slide numbers, page numbers, etc. to quickly and easily look up information. Add sticky notes, make lists, etc.

## Know how the exam will be run before it begins

Can you preview the questions? Can you go back and change your answers?

- Sometimes, you are not able to go back once you have pressed "next." In these cases, we encourage you to record your answer first on scrap paper before transferring it online.
- Read any/all instructions that you have and, if possible, ask questions in advance.

## Preparing to write an online exam

- Select a testing space where you will be able to concentrate.
- Be clear about what you need from those around you.
- Turn off your phone.
- Make sure you have everything you will need:
  - Computer and charger
  - Good internet connection
  - Notes and course material (if allowed)

- Scrap paper and a pen/pencil
- [Avoid plagiarism](#)
  - Do not chat with friends while taking the exam
  - Use your own words or cite as required
  - Keep the exam questions to yourself once you are done writing the test
- Don't forget to:
  - Save your work in case of glitches
  - Keep the browser open until you are finished and have reviewed your work
  - Submit the exam and take a screenshot
  - Seek assistance for any technical issues right away

## Practice self-compassion

Support your mental health and immune function by getting a good night's sleep, eating well, exercising, and staying in touch with friends and loved ones. **Focusing on academic work doesn't have to come at the expense of your health.**

- **Your feelings matter.** It's normal to feel anxious, stressed, worried, sad, angry, etc.
- **Take time to regulate your own emotions.** Embody positive emotions to protect your own wellbeing.
- **Build in social connections.** Try online exercise classes, Instagram live events, group chats, etc. Set up regular social interactions with friends around your study schedule. Make plans to chat with family members in other households on a regular basis.
- **Be realistic about your own expectations:** for your ability to focus, for your productivity. Recognize your limits and do your best to work within them. Your own mental health is the priority.
- [Deep breathing](#) and meditation will reduce your stress and help prevent burnout (see, for example, [loving kindness meditation](#)).
- **Reframe your perspective** in as positive a way as possible (e.g., "I am not trapped at home, but *safe* at home," and "Staying home is helping others stay safe and healthy").
- **There are no norms and expectations for this time,** so take advantage of this situation to form new habits, new routines, new traditions. These may be for yourself, with those who are self-isolating with you, and/or with those you are keeping in contact with online.
- **Set your foundation by promoting your sleep.** Pre-bedtime rituals give you a sense of control and train your body to prepare for sleep. Be sure to regulate anxiety-provoking content just before bed; for example, after 8 p.m., put your phone away or at least don't read the news.