
DISTANCE LEARNING TOOLKIT 2020-2021

This Toolkit is full of practical advice and resources for anyone attempting to navigate the virtual learning world

CONTENTS

1. Study and Work Techniques
2. Work Life Balance
3. Email and Written Etiquette
4. Video Conferencing Strategies
5. Virtual Learning Tools
6. Connecting and Working with Peers
7. Campus Resources



1. Study and Work Techniques

Thinking about your working style and habits can help you to define what works best for you. Here are some tried and true work and study techniques that you might consider:

Dedicated Workspaces: Choose a place and time. Everyone has their own idea about the best place and time to work. For some it is their bedroom at night, and for others it is a quiet staircase in the daytime. Workspaces don't have to be conventional. Many great works were written in cars, courtyards, and parks at night. Think about what spaces and times might work for you and give them a shot.

Tools for Your Work Space: Many New Yorkers are piecing together spaces to work comfortably and avoid distraction right now. If you fit this description you may want to considering trying some of these:

Standup desks: There are many health benefits of standing such as lowered blood sugar levels and increased energy. You don't have to run out and buy an adjustable desk though, a kitchen tabletop or dresser might be just the right height.

Ear muffs and ear plugs: Avoiding distracting noises that bellow through New York, "the city that never sleeps" is never easy. Whether you are doing work at home or during your commute, soundproofing earmuffs, plugs or headphones can help muffle distracting sounds while you study and work.

Blue light blockers: There is a relationship between exposure to "blue light" from screens before bedtime and disruptions in REM sleep. Blue Light is also thought to cause an overall eye soreness. Eye glasses that block Blue Light have become popular in job fields that require staring at screens for long periods of time. You can pick up a pair of these "Blue Blockers" for as little as five bucks. Most PCs and MACs also have [settings for Blue Light filters and blockers](#).

Separate yourself from your cellphone and other distracting devices while you work. If you can't be without your phone for too long try silencing it, sleep mode, or "do not disturb."

Notetaking: Most online courses involve video lectures. While it's tempting to just listen, it's often important to also take notes the same way you would in a traditional course.

Captioning: Onboard captioning for live video lectures are available on [Zoom](#) and [Microsoft Teams](#) (see links for instructions). Also, on both platforms it's possible for the host to enable access to written transcripts for attendees after a meeting is completed.

Early Scheduling and Breaking Down Assignments:

AS SOON AS THE SEMESTER STARTS read your course syllabus and schedule exams, assignments, and any project that has a due date on your preferred calendar so you can stay ahead on your studies.

INCLUDE PERSONAL DAYS AND (events, holidays, vacation) so that your work schedule stays realistic.

CONSIDER THE LOGICAL ORDER of completing tasks and schedule time on your calendar for:

1. Timelines
2. Outlines
3. Drafts and research
4. Conclusions and summaries
5. Complete the tasks above early enough to have some time for a final review, ideally after some rest.

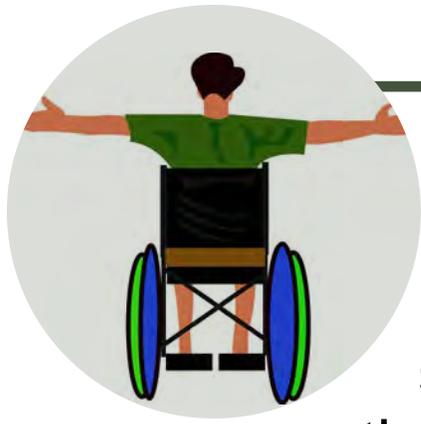
Scheduling Breaks:

Study in chunked sessions: Your ability to retain information diminishes after about 25-30 minutes, so break it up into multiple, smaller sessions ([pomodoro technique](#))

Break things down by task: estimate how long you will work at each sitting to complete a section of work

REWARD YOURSELF with fun activities during your breaks. Make sure you get away from your desk or study space

A BIT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, even just a stroll around the block can sometimes help you look at a problem in a different way and could even help you to solve it



2. Work Life Balance

Balancing school, work and life is stressful for anyone. Consider these tips for taking care of yourself when you find the time.

Nutrition:

Scheduling meals: Foods that are high in protein like meats and nuts contain the amino acid Tryptophan that is a precursor the chemical Serotonin which make human beings sleepy. Think about the right and wrong times to have a hardy meal.

Healthy snacking: One way to stay focused and avoid any health challenges is by eating healthy snacks. Here are some suggestions for snacks to keep your mind focused and energized: avocado, nuts, apples, veggies, grapes, granola bars, hummus, yogurt, sunflower seeds, apples, string cheese, and hard-boiled eggs.

Sunlight:

SUNLIGHT IS THE BEST SOURCE of Vitamin D. When the sun's UltraViolet B (UVB) rays hit skin cells, they produce energy for vitamin D synthesis. Low Vitamin D levels are associated with symptoms like fatigue, muscle weakness, and mood changes. Even during the winter, try to get some sunlight by sitting close to a window or going outside when the sun is out.

Yoga and Mindfulness:

IF YOUR LIFE INVOLVES HOURS of sitting at a desk or computer each day, it's a good idea to work-in stretching and mindfulness breaks. This doesn't mean you have to join a gym or sign up for yoga. YouTube is full of free lessons and there are also a lot of great free apps that offer 5 or 10 minute exercises. Consider these easy options for including mindfulness and stretching exercises into your routine.

[5 Minute Yoga](#) is a great free app that offers lessons broken down into 5 minute blocks

[10 Minute Mind](#) will send a 10 minute mindfulness exercise to your CUNY email each day if you sign up

[Smiling Mind](#) is free mindfulness app that offers free mindfulness exercises

Attitude: Your attitude impacts your overall productivity, study performance, and effectiveness of learning.

POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS are positive statements that can help you to challenge and overcome negative thoughts. If you doubt yourself or tell yourself “I can’t do this,” attempting a task is likely to be more difficult. If instead you focus your mind on positive outcomes and on how you can use your own individual strengths to achieve goals you will perform better. Tell yourself “I can do this” or “I got this” more often.

Sleep: It’s easier said than done but we all know getting a good night’s sleep make a difference. Consider these techniques for catching some decent Z’s:

TAKE TIME for relaxing activities away from your screen before sleep. Artwork, music, cooking or reading a good book are some popular choices but everyone is different.

LIMIT caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and big meals at night.

CREATE a calm and restful sleep environment. Soft lighting, relaxing music, or plush bedding can make all the difference.

TRY TO go to sleep and get up at the same time every day.

Student Discounts for Entertainment and School: Being a student sometimes has its perks. Consider these discounts for leisurely entertainment:

[Graduate Center List: Activities and Discounts](#)

[Hulu/Spotify Premium](#)

[Apple Music](#)

[Apple Store](#)

[Amazon prime](#)

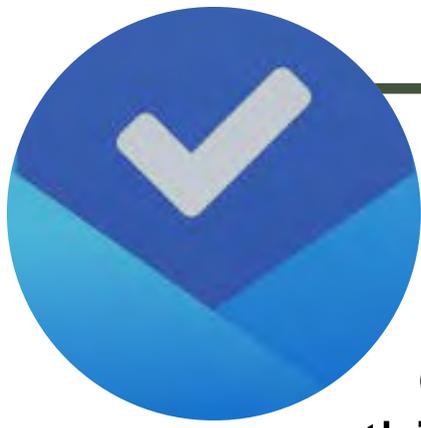
[Audible](#)

[New York Times \(Free\)](#)

[Wall Street Journal \(Free\)](#)

[Logitech](#)

[CUNY Arts](#)



3. Email and Written Etiquette

Written words live forever. As a distance learner it's a good idea to think about how to express yourself in posts and emails.

Writing Formally: when emailing professors, employees or colleagues at your school:

CHOOSE A CLEAR SUBJECT LINE for your emails and posts. If contacting the psychology department for example your subject might be: "PSY346_Questions on Final." For a Financial Aid question you might write; "Question about my Financial Aid_EMPLID: 63614780."

USE A FORMAL SALUTATION like "Dear Professor ____, Dear Ms. or Mr. ____, or "To whom it may concern".

SIGN OFF with a courteous statement like "Thank you for your time and consideration"

CONSIDER running your writing through [Grammarly](#), a free writing app that screens your writing and offers tips to help you with grammar, clarity, and effectiveness.

ATTEND virtual office hours. If you prefer to speak with your professor via phone or video, contact them and ask about their office hours. All professors at CUNY are required to hold office hours for courses they teach.



4. Video Conferencing Strategies

Lighting: having one good light source pointed on your face will help reduce any shading effects. If you are using natural light try to face the light source instead of having your back to it.

Background noise: mute your audio when listening to avoid broadcasting any background noise or typing sounds.

Audio/mic/screen sharing checks: schedule a meeting with a friend or classmate who can help make sure your audio and video are optimal before any important presentations or meetings.

ALTHOUGH YOU CAN pass with wearing shorts during a Zoom meeting it is a good idea to throw on a business casual top. Solid colors help to prevent the blurring effects sometimes caused by checkered or striped shirts.

TRY A SITTING POSITION where you're centered and sitting upright. Consider using a virtual background to ensure privacy especially on days when your space may be less presentable to friends, classmates and colleagues.

These practices are especially important for presentations and job interviews.



5. Virtual Learning Tools

CUNY students staff and faculty have access to licenses that can normally cost hundreds. There are also many free tools that can help you navigate the virtual learning world.

CUNY Licenses: The programs below are available to all CUNY Students for free, but there may also be licenses specific to your school or program that you can request through your school's IT department.

[Zoom](#)

[Microsoft 365](#)

[McAfee Virus Scanners](#)

[One Drive](#) (All active Faculty and Staff)

[Microsoft Teams](#) is a part of the Microsoft 365 suite. Users will have to use their CUNY first credentials to log in.

[Dropbox](#) (All active CUNY members)

Text-to-Speech and Speech-to-Text tools: (Kurzweil 3000, Browse Aloud, and the onboard dictation tools found in [Microsoft 365](#)) paired with trainings may be available you through your school's IT or Disability Services Office.

Free Tools:

[Google Docs, Sheets, Slides, Forms, and Drive:](#) Are free cloud based alternatives to Microsoft 365

[RateMyProfessor.com:](#) Is a site where students can review their instructors. Many students us it to make informed choices when registering for classes and select instructors that match their learning style.

Website blockers/timers: block yourself or limit use of Facebook and other distracting webpages with extensions like [BlockSite](#), [LeechBlock](#), [SelfControl](#), and [Simple Blocker](#). These extensions will appear at the top right hand of your web browser so that you can quickly block yourself from visiting tempting websites that might distract you from your work.



6. Connecting and Working with Peers

Consider how to distinguish work versus casual video meetings.

Building Virtual Spaces for Social Life:

[WhatsApp](#), [FB Video Chat](#), [Google Hangouts](#) and Zoom (personal) are some of the most widely used platforms for chatting with classmates or peers.

POPULAR OPTIONS for casual virtual meetups are game nights, happy hours, video game nights, [Netflix & Amazon "Watch Parties"](#) and group study sessions.

Group Assignments:

DETERMINE if your group should meet via email, video chat or phone.

ESTABLISH roles for group members in the assignment like editor, project manager, note taker or researcher for each section of the assignment

BE RESPONSIBLE of your portion of the assignment and communicate with other members if you need help or extensions

CONNECT with your instructor early on if you need clarification on the assignment

USE a shared document to schedule goals and benchmarks to ensure you meet your deadline



7. Campus Resources

Take advantage of the services you pay for on your campus. You may be surprised by the resources, advisement and opportunities provided by:

[Counseling](#)

[Disability Services Offices](#)

[Women's Centers](#)

[LGBTQI](#)

[Library Services](#)

[Career Services](#)

[Food Pantries](#)

[Veterans Affairs](#)

Tutoring Centers

Keep your eye on your CUNY First To-Do, school email address and webpage for updates about Scholarships, Emergency Grants, and Technology Loans

We would love to hear your [feedback and suggestions](#) on how to improve this toolkit.

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Luis "Junior" Alvarez, *Chairperson CUNY Coalition for Students with Disabilities (CCSD), Bronx Community College*

Charmaine Townsell, *University Director of Student Engagement and Inclusion, CUNY Central Office*

Chris Fleming, *CUNY Learning Disabilities Project Coordinator*

Raymond Perez, *Director of The Accessibility Resource Center, CUNY Hostos Community College*