



# ACADEMIC STRATEGIES

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## Orientation

At the beginning of each school year, post-secondary institutions have a process called orientation that allows you, as a new student to become more familiar with the campus.

Orientation will include a guided tour to give you a better sense of how to navigate the campus and where important facilities are located. They may cover student clubs and on-campus activities that offer you the opportunity to meet like minded people.

By going through orientation, you will have a much better understanding of your surroundings and a greater ability to schedule your day to fit all the classes, clubs, and activities you attend and participate in, not to mention planning your trip to the institution and home again if you choose not to live on campus.

It should be mention that the orientation process can vary from one campus to the next, largely depending on what kind of post-secondary institution you have chosen and how many people are enrolled there.

One thing to take into account is that while going through orientation is extremely helpful for getting new students acquainted with their campus, on a sensory level it can be very overwhelming as well.

Some students who are on the autism spectrum choose not to participate in orientation as it is too much of a sensory overload for them. You can also do a modified version of orientation and tour your campus with a parent or guardian before the school year starts; therefore, the amount of people and commotion is reduced and it will be a far more pleasant experience.

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## Supports

For a student on the spectrum, it is important to know what support options are available to assist you and to get in touch with them as soon as possible.

Depending on who you are, you may find such assistance helpful to you or that you don't need it, but it's always a good idea to have a safety net and know where to find it just in case.



### Supports available on campus for you can include:

- Disability services
- Student counselling
- Writing centers
- Tutoring networks

By far, disability services is the most important one for students on the spectrum to reach out to, and you should get in contact with them as soon as possible.

By getting in touch with disability services and student counselling, you can speak confidentially about any issues, obstacles and discomforts you may face or questions you may have both as an autistic student and a new student. This will help you to feel more confident and secure and to get the most out of campus life. Disability services staff may also provide you with information about groups and activities that will suit you, allow you to make connections with other students on the spectrum.

With tutors and writing centers, you can get more information about them through disability services and/or student counselling or through the university website.

Using a tutor or accessing support from a student writing centre can help you improve your writing and improve your grades. Courses and tutoring may be conducted online and you may need some assistance to adapt to this format – the disability services office may be able to help you with this as well.

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## Challenges

Working and living in a college environment can present a number of issues for young people on the spectrum.

### These can include:

- Socializing with unfamiliar groups of people and interpreting various social situations
- Being able to schedule and manage one's time to be academically productive
- Asking for help when needed
- Dealing with the sensory overload that a fast-paced, crowded post-secondary environment
- Being able to manage stress that can arise from a large workload, a rapid paced environment, elevated expectations, and other outside factors
- By reaching out to disability services or a counsellor, you can gain suggestions on how to navigate these challenges or have modifications put in place that will make your post-secondary experience more manageable

### Some steps you can take on your own are to:

- Take recreational breaks in between when there is time to do so; whether by means of going to your dorm, working out, going on a walk, etc.
- Try to avoid scheduling classes back to back so that you have an opportunity to take breaks in between classes to reset
- Look into activities or groups that you can participate in on or off campus that balance your work time with fun time

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## Student Expectations

In post-secondary life, there are rules both written and unwritten about how to conduct one's self in various situations.

These expectations or an actual code of conduct may not be explicitly stated as much as they are implied and communicated through non-verbal cues, which presents a challenge for students on the spectrum in the way of telling wrong from right.

Additionally, there is no universal code or set of expectations for every institution; the rules may differ from one place to the next depending on what kind of institution you are attending, the size of the student body and the institution itself.

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## Syllabus

When you begin each post-secondary course, your professor will give you a document called a syllabus (or a course outline).

### A good syllabus usually has the following information:

- Describes what the course is about
- Lists the expectations of the course
- Describes what the assignments are and when they are due
- Gives dates for quizzes, mid-term exams and final exams
- States what percentage of your grade each assignment or exam counts for
- Provides the professor's contact information and office hours for any questions you may have

The course syllabus is an important document. Keep it in a safe place and pay close attention to it throughout the course. It can seem overwhelming at first to process all the information in each course syllabus – so be sure to ask for clarification if you need it.

To save yourself from being stressed out, there are a few strategies you can implement to help yourself as you navigate your class syllabus:

- Set time aside to go through the syllabus in its entirety
- Take note of (preferably highlight) deadlines and mark them down on a planner/calendar

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- Make a plan for how you will approach class readings. Whether you do the readings before or after class is less important but make sure you do them!
- But, in courses where there are pop quizzes at the start of classes, it is wise to read and comprehend the material beforehand
- It can seem overwhelming at first to process all the information in each course syllabus – so be sure to ask for clarification if you need it

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### Time Management

Post-secondary education is a big leap from high school. Most students begin post-secondary at age 18 or older and as adults, they are expected to be entirely responsible for managing their time and completing their work without help or reminders from parents or instructors.

This requires good organization skills and discipline which can present a challenge as students on the spectrum typically struggle with focus and forward planning.

- By listing big assignments on the major calendar with all the relevant information organized by their importance, you can clearly see how much planning you need to do for each assignment. You can also see how far in advance you need to start working on each major assignment
- The minor calendar makes sure that you do not lose track of the daily and weekly tasks that are required of you, whether they be quizzes, readings, small components of your larger assignments or tasks outside of your academic life like work and volunteer positions
- Whatever you do not finish, you can simply move to the next day to complete
- When scheduling your time for each assignment, base it on factors such as how long it took you to complete an assignment of this size before
- Taking account of the size of the assignment, reward yourself on a similar scale and hold off on your daily leisure activities until your work is over to make the gratification that much better
- Make sure to take short breaks when you feel overwhelmed

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### Goal Setting

Being able to set realistic goals for yourself is also important. Students on the spectrum tend to be perfectionists and have intense interests, which can get in the way of success and efficiency in post-secondary education.

To ensure you do not fall into these common traps and set your goals effectively, the following strategies can help:

- Refer to your major assignment calendar and see which big assignments are on the horizon, then adjust your schedule accordingly in order to complete these tasks
- As grades for your previous work start to come in over the semester, take account of what kind of grade you need to achieve on future assignments to reach whatever academic goal you have for yourself
- Dedicate more time to whatever class or assignment needs improvement the most

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### Study Skills

Focus can be an issue for students on the spectrum. When it comes to studying, there are many strategies to help you make the most of your time and prevent yourself from being distracted.

#### A few include:

- Highlighting key material, which helps to a certain point but won't be helpful to you in terms of recalling information for a test or exam if this is all you do
- Connecting concepts takes things a step further. You can do this by memorizing and working through one particular concept first, then asking yourself how it fits with another concept that you have already learned. By seeing how one concept can be applied and connected to the next, the whole of the course/test/assignment material will make more and more sense as you go
- Virtually nothing in a course curriculum is ever random in context to its other parts
- Flash cards are a common strategy for testing and memorization, and have been an effective method for many years. However, they only work if you put the relevant information in the level of depth it requires on the cards beyond simple surface details
- After you have made yourself certain with one set of flash cards, keep going by testing yourself through more sophisticated methods
- It never hurts to find a study partner to test you, whether with cards or without. You can also test them on the material so you both come out with a much richer understanding than you had before, especially if you create new questions or reconfigure current ones to make them more challenging



### Study Spaces

One thing you may or may not be introduced to on an orientation tour are the various study spaces on campus, including the library, common areas or lounges for students in specific faculties.

The formal places for studying aren't the only places to sit down and work. Which space works for you is a matter of self-knowledge and experience. Look for places that aren't overstimulating or crowded where you can work comfortably.



- The library is the main study space and is usually reliably quiet if silence helps you work. However, this isn't always the case and some noise and chatter can still occur
- Hallways outside of classrooms can be quiet between classes, though people will still come and go and a number of classes ending at the same time can turn it into a hectic environment. Office corridors can be quieter, but given that this is a hallway for professors' offices you may not be allowed to sit there
- Faculty lounges can vary on how loud they are, though they can certainly be a great place to socialize and make connections with people in your discipline
- Working outside is an option in warmer seasons, though the weather is obviously a determining factor as is the strength of the internet connection

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### Group Work

There will be situations during your post-secondary education where you will need to work with others in a group. This is not always easy for students on the spectrum, given the difficulty in organization and social interaction they tend to face. Speak to your instructor to see if there are alternative assignments, you can complete instead of a group assignment.

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### Tutoring and Student Learning Services

Tutoring is an effective option to help you succeed academically in post-secondary. The service may be free depending on if the tutor is another student volunteering through the students' centre or if you found them privately. You can locate a tutor through the campus student centre, the main office for your faculty (for departmental tutors), a student association, or even online.

In addition to tutoring, there are also learning services available on campuses such as academic writing centres that can assist in improving the writing and academic performance of students. Make a point to find out where these services are located on campus, and see for yourself if they are of any benefit or relevance to you.



### Program Requirements and Academic Advisors

As you go through university, there are certain pre-requisite courses and mandatory courses that you will have to take to in order to graduate. Occasionally you can have some course requirements waived or you can write a challenge exam if you feel you have the required knowledge already, but most of the time they are compulsory.

It is very important to pay close attention to your program requirements so that you are missing courses or do not have enough course credits when you expect to graduate.

- Academic advisors, found at the campus student centre can be of great help in understanding program and credit requirements for graduating
- Working with an advisor makes sorting through these crucial details easier and more flexible, especially when dealing with the larger institutions
- Given the large number of students that advisors work with, sometimes long wait times at student services that can result, it may be a good idea to book an appointment with an advisor online in advance

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### Online Learning

Online learning can present many advantages, especially given the situation with the coronavirus pandemic. Besides allowing students to effectively work from their home, the internet is a far more convenient medium to work on than an actual class, given that you can work at your own pace and not feel anxious and overwhelmed as students on the spectrum who deal with dysregulation and anxiety issues typically would in a classroom setting.

For those who have an atypical learning style or find social interactions challenging, working online can be preferable to an in-class environment. By interacting and working online (Zoom, email, IM, etc.), students with social challenges can interact with other students without the same level of pressure. They can work with this medium as long and as much as they need to, and move into a physical setting once they feel more comfortable.

There can also be cons to the online system, especially if a student is more accustomed to a classroom setting. Organizational tools that were familiar in the classroom will need to be modified, access to resources may not be the same, and the potential for distraction and demotivation is much higher working on a computer at home.

For students on the spectrum with attentional and organizational issues or for those that have a hard time dealing with change, this can be a great challenge.

### Online Learning Strategies

If you have the means to do so, set your study space away from where you typically engage in leisure activities (i.e., a desk instead of a table where you usually surf the web). Make sure to minimize whatever distractions you may have in the area.

- Log onto your university's online service and find where all your important documents (syllabus, assignments, grades, lecture notes/PowerPoints) are so you can easily access them while you work
- Some campuses also offer accessibility tools so make sure to look for those as well
- However you organized yourself in class before (i.e., with a calendar or a planner), continue using those methods as you study online from home

