

CAE Tips for Success in Self-Guided Study

1. Set ground rules for yourself.

First, identify what times of the day you work best (are you a morning person or an evening person?). Next, think through how much time you need to devote to your study plan to realistically complete the tasks you've outlined for yourself. For example, if you plan to watch lectures and create a summary resource for each, you will likely need at least 2 hrs total for every 1 hr of lecture assigned. Then create a daily schedule that accounts for that time, with scheduled breaks (1-2 hr chunks can work well with 10-15 min breaks between them). Set aside a few hours each week to assess and schedule your upcoming week. It's unlikely that every week's schedule will be exactly the same, build in some time to reflect and plan. Be sure to schedule your non-school related tasks (like working out or FaceTime with friends) first, so that you can be more realistic about the time you set aside for learning. Separating work time from free time is essential! Otherwise, your free time is filled with guilt about needing to work and your work time is less efficient.

1. Set boundaries with your family/friends and housemates.

Develop a clear signal or schedule for when you are at work and are not to be interrupted. Set specific times each week to catch up with friends and family over the phone or virtually. Then stick to interacting with them during those scheduled times. Be honest with everyone about what you need from them. If certain friends or family have a hard time respecting these boundaries, hold firm and let them know that while you care very much for them, you have academic obligations that are important to your success. If you have children, a spouse, or housemates who have trouble fighting the urge to interrupt you, perhaps designate a place for them to leave you messages while you are working (e.g. a dry erase board), so they don't feel like they have to hold in their thoughts all day.

2. Avoid the couch.

With good Wi-Fi, you can study anywhere, even the couch (or let's be honest... your bed), but just because you can doesn't mean you should. Designate a specific room or area so there's a mental boundary between working and relaxing. If you don't have a home office, figure out a space that has enough surface area for your work and that won't lead to laptop neck and back strain.

3. Go outside.

Try to get outside for 10-20 minutes at least once a day. Sunlight is hugely important in mood stabilization and healthy circadian rhythms. Taking a 10-20 min walk every 4 hrs is a great way to maintain energy and focus.

4. Get lit.

Work where you feel most energized. Typically, this will be in the room with the most natural light and the nicest view. If you don't have a room with good natural light to work in, make sure your space is well lit with artificial light. Getting a full spectrum bulb for your desk lamp can be a cheap, easy way to energize your study space. Additionally, light needs to be diffused and the fixtures well positioned to avoid creating computer screen glare. Try to incorporate layers of light from multiple sources, not a single light source, to reduce eyestrain.

5. Practice “mise-en-place.”

Mise-en-place is a French culinary term meaning “everything in its place.” Make sure your study area is set up with all the necessary items (headphones, laptop charger, syllabus, pens, etc) within your reach and minimal clutter. A cluttered work area can lead to cluttered thoughts, and at home, distractions are everywhere. Limit the stuff on your desk or work surface to whatever you're working on at the moment and something that brings you joy, like a piece of art or a plant.

6. Stay focused.

Taking on household tasks (like prepping dinner, paying bills, doing chores) throughout the day can hurt your productivity. If you're tempted to throw in a load of laundry or do the dishes when you should be reviewing important concepts from your most recent lecture, work for 25 minutes, then allow for five-minute housework breaks. Or schedule these tasks on your calendar as you would any work appointment. This way, you can set a timer to tackle some chores, then get back to work. With pets, set a schedule for walks (~every 3 hrs) so you both can stretch your legs.

Concentration can falter in as little as 20 minutes, so experts recommend the 20-20-20 rule: Work for 20 minutes, break for 20 seconds, then while breaking, look 20 feet away to reset your focus and attention span. Additionally, if you're struggling with procrastination try the pomodoro method (<https://medium.com/manager-mint/the-pomodoro-technique-a-productivity-guide-908c73619e9>).



7. The end is coming.

It can be difficult to step away from your work if you don't have a hard-cutoff time. Create a set schedule of total working hours that matches the time you spent in class and studying before this pandemic-inspired disruption. Create a close-out ritual that you complete at a specific time each day to transition you to your down time. Consider listing (on a note pad or white board) the concepts you feel you learned well that day, as well as the content you'd like to get another chance to review. Another option might be to review that day's to do list, checking off what you've accomplished and what tasks are slated for tomorrow, then go for a walk (or workout, or call a friend- whatever allows you to begin to relax).