

COPING WITH A 12-WEEK SEMESTER

Guelph is one of a few universities in Ontario that uses a 12-week semester. Many students, both new and experienced, are caught off guard by how quickly their school work can snowball within one or two weeks. As a result, many get behind and spend the rest of the semester playing "catch-up." Some students have described the feel of working in the 12-week time frame as a race through the semester, so we thought it would be useful to use this metaphor for organizing these suggestions.



"WARM UP" FOR LEARNING

One way to cope with the 12-week semester is to realize that there will not be a period of several weeks at the beginning during which you can ease yourself back into "study mode." Some new students don't even bring a pen or paper with them to their first classes, assuming that nothing will happen. Inexperienced students, in particular, need to be aware that many instructors will assign work right from the first day of classes.

If you find that it takes you a while to re-adjust to study mode even after you've got a couple of semesters under your belt, think of and use Orientation Week as a time to get re-oriented to learning. Plan to be back on campus or in town early during Orientation Week, something you may not have done since your first semester. Pick up reading lists and course outlines from your instructors as soon as you arrive. Have a look through your new textbooks before classes begin. Take time now to finally learn how to use library databases. Get your desk, binders, notebooks and lab materials organized. If you can "warm up" for studying before classes begin, you'll be better prepared to get down to work right from the first day of classes.

GET A HEAD START

If you'll be taking courses with a heavy reading load, get reading lists from your instructors ahead of time and purchase or locate the readings or textbooks you'll need. Skimming the readings before the semester begins will introduce you to the concepts to be discussed in class and may help you read more efficiently during the semester.

HIT THE GROUND RUNNING

It's critically important to keep on top of your work right from day one of the semester. That's simple advice and many students start off determined to do just that. But it isn't easy when you're still settling into your room or apartment, getting to know new house mates, or becoming re-acquainted with friends you may not have seen over the summer. Challenging as it can be, there is no better way to prevent yourself from getting behind than by not letting it happen in the first place.

TAKE A BREATHER

When dealing with intense workloads, many students feel that they simply cannot stop for a break. Learning effectiveness goes down and stress goes up when studying is done in long, intense stretches lasting hour after hour.

Because of the intensity of the 12-week semester, it's useful to try to take one or two major **breaks**, like Thanksgiving weekend, after midterms, or after weeks 4 and 8. A major break is at least one whole day, and preferably a weekend, completely away from school work. To do this effectively, without feeling **guilty** and without getting behind, it's important to plan ahead, right from the beginning of the semester, for these "mini-vacations" from studying.

If you'd like more information on planning strategies see [Creating a Master Plan](#).

"COOL DOWN" AND REFLECT

When the semester is over and the last exam has been written, set aside some time to reflect on how well you managed the previous 12 weeks. Analyze which planning strategies worked well and which didn't. If you got behind, try to pinpoint why. If you don't understand where things went wrong, you may condemn yourself to the same fate next semester. And if you don't know why things went well, you could have a hard time repeating and improving on that success.

If you make "cooling down" or debriefing on your time management (or lack of it!) for the semester a priority, you'll ensure that your skills in dealing with the challenges of the 12-week semester will continue to improve.