



LIVING & LEARNING

STUDENT ACTIVIST

SNEHA WADHWANI

SHARES HER ADVICE FOR

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

5 TIPS

for overcoming common
barriers to study success

SCHEDULING MADE SIMPLE

Get and stay organized!

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GO2GRAD

TO ENHANCE, TO EMPOWER, TO ENRICH

NEWSLETTER

CONTENTS



PAGE 3

WHY DO STUDENTS NEED TO BE CHALLENGED?

Learn how challenge helps students to develop the growth mindset necessary to succeed at academic, personal, and professional endeavours.

PAGE 6

5 BARRIERS TO STUDY SUCCESS (AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM)

Do you struggle with studying? These are common barriers that can prevent you from studying effectively and solutions for beating them.

PAGE 10

SCHEDULING MADE SIMPLE: A HOW-TO GUIDE

Become a master of time management with this simple tutorial from Go2Grad Tutors' founder, Ahmad Galuta, on how to create (and stick to!) a schedule that works for you.

PAGE 14

LIVING AND LEARNING WITH STUDENT ACTIVIST SNEHA WADHWANI

From strategies for managing stress to navigating McMaster University's unique interdisciplinary Arts & Science program, this student shares her experience and advice.



Why Do Students Need to Be Challenged?

BY ROZY ABO MAZID

Students need to be challenged to grow. They need to be able to develop their thinking and skills by facing difficulties and learning how to overcome them. This is because students who are constantly challenged develop a **growth mindset**. In a growth mindset, students understand that *their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching, and persistence*. Being challenged allows students to venture out and try new things where they might fail or succeed, and through these failures and successes, they will learn how to be and do better.

It is the idea that a student can win the science fair one year and lose the next that pushes the student to try and do things differently, to learn from their mistakes, and to strengthen their critical thinking skills by making progress in their work. If a student creates the same project every year and wins, then that student is not growing, as they are not being challenged and consequently not making progress; this leads students into a “comfort zone”.

A **comfort zone** is defined as *a psychological state in which things feel familiar to a person and they are at ease and in control of their environment*, leading to lower levels of anxiety and stress. In this zone, a steady level of performance is expected. However, this steady level of performance does not allow one to grow and leads to a **fixed mindset**. In a fixed mindset, *students believe that their abilities, intelligence, and talents are fixed traits*. A fixed mindset *emphasizes the idea that these traits cannot be developed further*, so trying to strengthen them is deemed unnecessary. To understand the **difference between a fixed and growth mindset**, consider these statements: “she's a natural-born singer” and “I can improve my singing skills”. While the former displays a fixed mindset, the latter portrays a growth mindset. The comfort zone discourages a growth mindset and encourages the fixed. In order to avoid a fixed mindset, students need to be challenged.

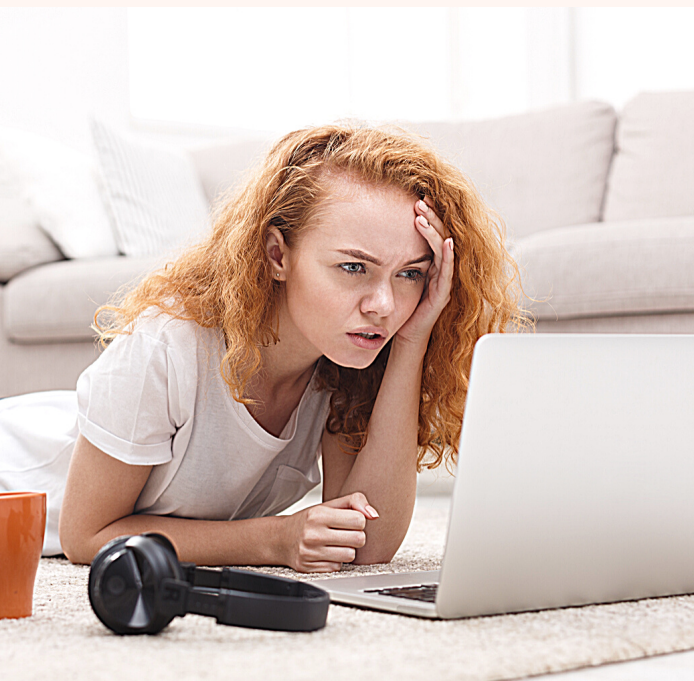


One way of figuring out whether you feel challenged at school is by **asking yourself a few questions** like:

- 1. Do I feel like I am learning something new every day?*
- 2. Do I feel motivated to do my work?*
- 3. Are my assignments challenging me to try harder?*
- 4. Am I paying attention in class, and if not, is it because I know everything being taught?*

These are just a few questions that can help you determine whether you are being challenged academically. Having been challenged my whole life as a student, I can say with full confidence that I have developed a growth mindset that has helped me in my academic, personal, and professional endeavours. Whether you are in high school or university, I encourage you to check in with yourself and ask yourself if you are being challenged enough. If not, strive to create your own challenges, as it will be worth it in the long run.





5 BARRIERS TO

STUDY SUCCESS

AND HOW TO OVERCOME
THEM

By Kay Aspinall

There are many reasons why students struggle to study effectively, especially in a blended or online learning environment. From the lure of Netflix marathons to difficulty concentrating, it can feel impossible to get and stay focused on school work. Luckily, you're not alone. Many students have experienced similar challenges and learned to work through them, and you can too! Read on to learn about some of the most common barriers to effective studying and how you can conquer them.



#1. UNCLEAR GOALS

SOLUTION: WRITE S.M.A.R.T GOALS FOR YOURSELF AND DISPLAY THEM SOMEWHERE VISIBLE WHILE YOU WORK.

Think of your goals like directions from a GPS to your destination. If the directions are confusing, you're probably going to have much more difficulty getting where you want to go. That's why setting clear goals is so important! It's also crucial that you write down your goals. Just like trying to memorize a complicated series of directions without references is difficult, you'll have a hard time remembering your goals if you rely on your memory alone. Also, writing out your goals and displaying them somewhere visible while you work is a great way to stay motivated and remind yourself what you're working towards!

S = specific (simple, sensible, significant)

M = measurable (motivating, meaningful)

A = attainable (agreed, achievable)

R = relevant (reasonable, realistic)

T = timely (time-based, time-sensitive)

To start setting great goals, Go2Grad Tutors recommends using the S.M.A.R.T. framework:

If you want to learn more about how you can use the S.M.A.R.T framework to set and achieve your goals, check out our latest blog post [here!](#)

#2. DISTRACTING ENVIRONMENT

SOLUTION: CREATE A DEDICATED STUDY-ONLY SPACE

Your mother was right - a tidy space does make you more productive! Your environment influences how you feel, so create a space that is clean, comfortable, and has minimal distractions. Ideally, this should be separate from where you relax, and you should NEVER study in bed (it's bad for your productivity AND your sleep!). Notifications on your phone should be silenced and if you're listening to music, make sure it isn't too loud. It can be challenging at first, but by strictly limiting yourself to doing only work in this space, you'll eventually train your brain to settle into 'study mode' whenever you're there, making your study sessions more efficient and productive.





#3. NO STUDY PLAN

SOLUTION: MAKE A SCHEDULE THAT MEETS YOUR NEEDS

If your goals are like directions, you can think of your study plan or schedule like your travel itinerary. When you take a trip, it's important to know key details like where you'll be staying, when your tour is scheduled, the business hours of major attractions, etc. Similarly, it's essential to know when and how you'll take steps to achieve your academic goals by writing out a detailed plan for studying. It doesn't have to be all work and no play, but you should make sure that you have enough time to reasonably accomplish your tasks.

For more advice on creating a study schedule that works for you, check out the next article!

#4. TRYING TO DO TOO MUCH

SOLUTION: FOCUS ON ONE THING AT A TIME

Are you a great multitasker? Spoiler alert, science says you're probably not. In fact, some researchers suggest that multitasking can actually reduce productivity by up to 40%!¹ What does this mean for your studying? It's simple: focus on one task at a time. Jumping between topics or checking your phone while you work breaks your workflow and forces you to take more time in order to get back to the task at hand. The Pomodoro technique - focusing exclusively on one task for 25 minutes, then taking a 5-minute break - is a great way to keep your brain on track. Incidentally, 25 minutes is approximately the length of time you should spend reviewing content from each subject daily. If you're interested in trying the Pomodoro technique yourself, check out Go2Grad Tutors' daily planner (available [here](#))!



¹ Rubinstein, J. S., Meyer, D. E. & Evans, J. E. (2001). Executive Control of Cognitive Processes in Task Switching. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance*, 27, 763-797.

#5. NEGLECTING THE BASICS

SOLUTION: EAT, DRINK, AND EXERCISE

When you're focused on getting the most out of your study routine, it can be easy to overlook basic necessities like drinking water, eating enough, and moving your body. These things might seem simple or even cliché, but they're crucial to successful studying. Your brain uses up to 20% of your body's energy - more than any other organ - so it's important to make sure it has the fuel necessary to work to its full potential. In other words, try to make sure you drink water at least once every hour and keep healthy snacks on hand. Regularly moving your body, even through low-intensity activities like walking or stretching, is also beneficial because it stimulates blood flow throughout the body, including to the brain.



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Scheduling Made Simple

A How-To Guide

By Ahmad Galuta

Do you struggle with staying organized? Not sure how to create a schedule that you'll stick to? Go2Grad Tutors is here to help! Follow this tutorial to create your own study schedule and become a master of time management.

What You'll Need:

- Blank paper
- Pencil
- Go2Grad Tutors' weekly planner template (available [here](#))
- An online calendar application (we use Google Calendar, but similar applications like Apple's iCalendar or Microsoft's Outlook Calendar work too!)



Making Your Schedule:

1

Start by writing a list of all your tasks on a blank sheet of paper. Don't worry about categorizing your tasks yet, just write down whatever you can think of. Make sure that your tasks are specific and measurable.

2

Arrange your list in order of importance from highest to lowest. Your first five tasks (#1-#5) are your top priorities and your next five tasks (#6-#10) are secondary priorities. Write these in the first two boxes on page one of the [weekly planner](#).



EXAMPLE

You have a chemistry lab due next week that requires the following tasks: analyze the results; do some research; write the introduction, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion.

Here's a **poorly written** task:

"Work on my chemistry lab"

Meanwhile, this task is **more specific** and **identifies exactly what you need to focus on** this week to complete your lab on time:

"Analyze results, do some research, and write the introduction and methods for my chemistry lab"

3

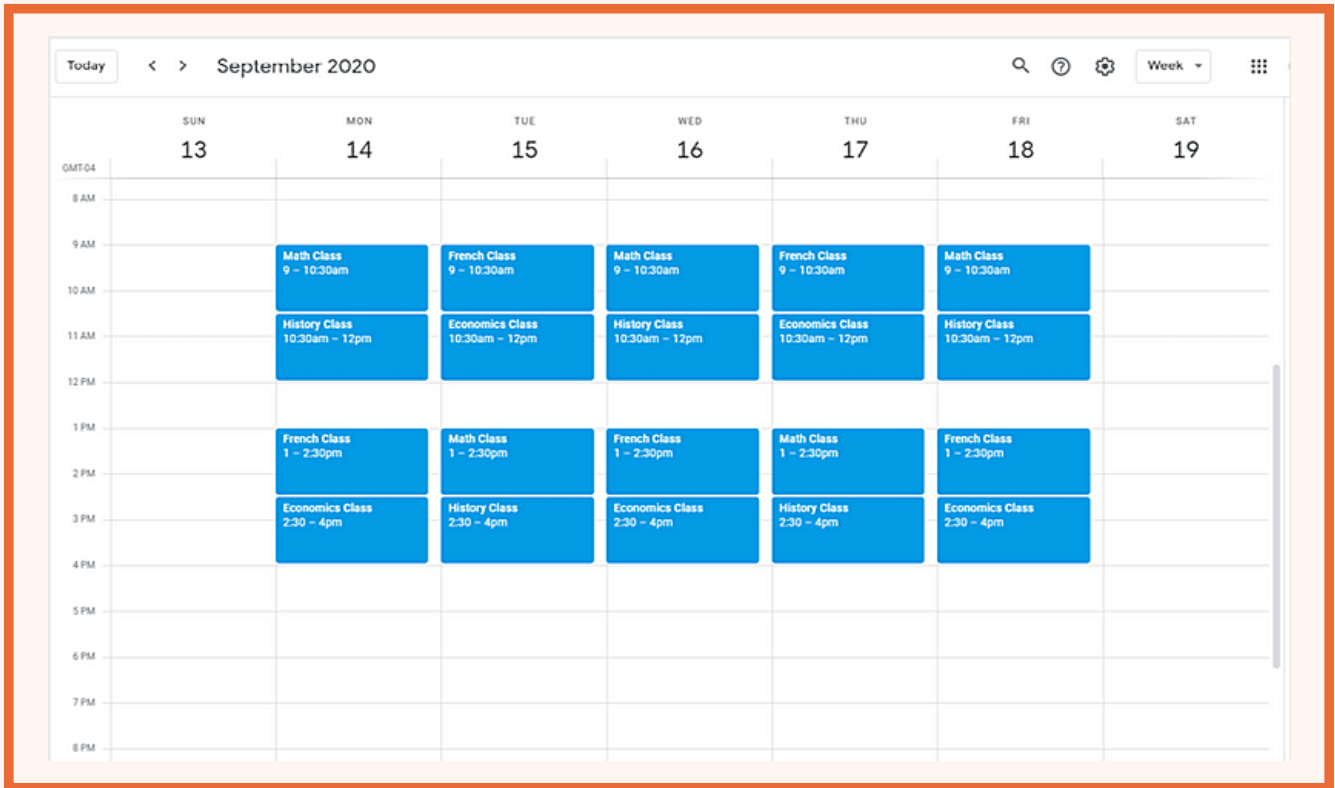
Next, list five (or more!) things that you want to do for yourself. These could be personal goals for your health, leisure, well-being, fitness, family, etc. Write these in the last box on page one of the weekly planner.

4

Finally, think of one action that you can take to help you accomplish all the weekly tasks. This is your commitment for the week. This could be as simple as sleeping by 10:00 p.m, or dedicating time every day after school to study. The choice is yours. Hold yourself accountable by checking the boxes on the commitment checklist portion on page one of the planner for each day that you've committed to that action.

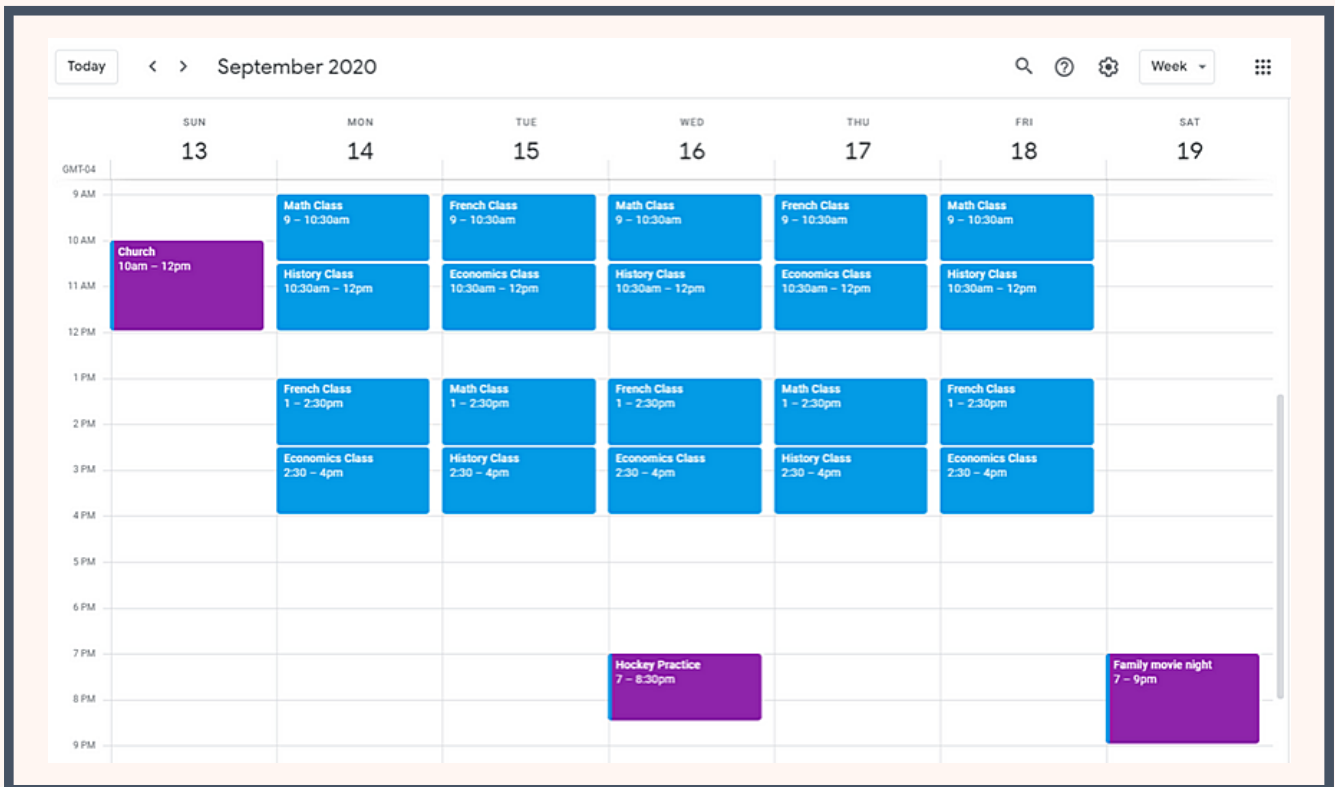
5

Open your calendar application and start by scheduling your mandatory tasks. Start with attending classes (in person or online) and work, if you have a job.



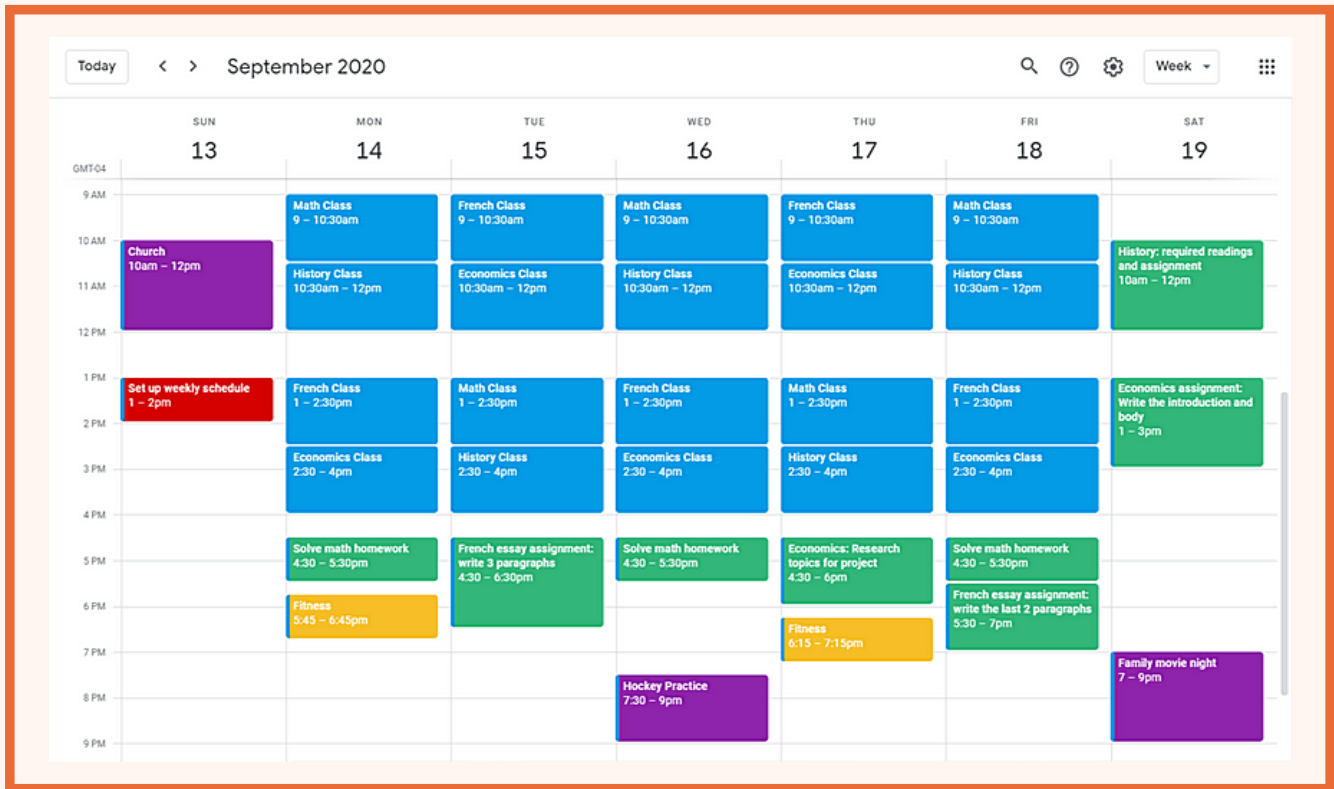
6

Next, add any other mandatory activities, such as attending a worship service, rehearsals, practice, appointments, or family commitments.



7

What you're left with after scheduling all mandatory tasks is flexible time. Now, have a look at your weekly planner and the tasks you wrote, then start scheduling those tasks starting with the most important. Continue scheduling tasks in your calendar until you've slotted enough time to complete them.



8

At the end of the week, use page two of your weekly planner to evaluate your progress and, if necessary, adapt your schedule for the following week.

TIPS

- Usually, the most important tasks are also the hardest and the ones you'll dread doing the most. Aim to schedule these tasks during a time of the day when you think you would be best able to tackle them.
- Schedule easier tasks during times of the day when you think you are less able or less motivated to do them. It's less daunting to face an easy task than a difficult one when you're tired.
- It may be difficult to know how much time is needed to complete your tasks. Try your best and guess how much time you think you need. You will get better with time!
- Don't forget to schedule a time for breaks, extra-curricular activities, and leisure!

Congratulations, you've made your schedule! Getting yourself organized can be challenging at first, but like anything else, you'll get better with practice. If you need support or want more challenges to help boost your productivity, check out our [Elevate](#) program!

LIVING AND LEARNING

*with student activist
Sneha Wadhwani*

BY KAY ASPINALL

Everyone knows someone who always seems to have a million things going on - from school or work to volunteering to personal hobbies. For me, that person is **Sneha Wadhwani**, a longtime friend whose exceptional work ethic and wisdom beyond her years have been a constant source of inspiration for me.

Originally from Indore, India, Sneha and her family moved to the United States when she was 6 years old before moving to Peterborough, Ontario when she was 11. In addition to enrolling in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program in high school, she became heavily involved in local social justice advocacy, began avidly writing poetry, and started exploring her passion for all things food. Now 20 years old, she attends **McMaster University** in Hamilton, Ontario where she is currently in her third year of a unique **Bachelor of Arts & Science (B.Arts Sc.)** program. I was able to catch up with Sneha over (virtual) coffee to learn more about how she balances her busy schedule.

Since I was unfamiliar with what an Arts & Science program involved, I asked Sneha to **describe how her program worked and some its benefits and challenges.**

"There's lots to love! The Arts & Science program really encourages critical thinking and interdisciplinary learning, which is the core focus of the program. The first few years are focused on building skills rather than specialized knowledge through a huge variety of courses that set you up for success in any discipline. For example, I've taken everything from physics and calculus to courses in political science and history."



“

To be a student is to learn, at its very core. It's really a mindset of being open to what your life experiences have to teach you and being open to receiving that knowledge from whatever source it may come.



"The program gives you lots of options for graduate studies - other students have gone on to do everything from medical school to law to teaching and more! The only difficulty would probably be transitioning to a highly specialized field afterwards, like nursing or engineering.

The wide variety of courses means you'll probably end up taking something you don't love at one point or another, but by your senior years it's almost all elective courses, which lets you specialize and focus on your interests. The professors really enjoy their work and want to connect to real world issues; the structure of the program is not always traditional, but I really enjoy that professors try to make the material engaging and allow you to get really creative and personal with your projects. Since it can be so open-ended, you have to be able to build structure for yourself, especially in your senior years.

Overall, I would say that my favourite part has to be the community. There are only 60 students in my year and I take all my required courses for the program with this group, so having familiar faces in my classes really helped with the transition to university. We also do lots of fun activities and have a sense of team spirit within the group - there's a really tight-knit community there, if you want to engage with it."

Based on my own high school experience, it sounded like adapting to such an interdisciplinary, self-directed style of learning could be challenging at first. However, as a third year student, Sneha has had some time to get used to the university grind. I wanted to know **how her daily routine and study habits now compared to when she was in high school.**

"I feel like what has changed most for me since high school is my mindset rather than my work habits, per se. In high school, I thought grades were everything and always put a lot of pressure on myself to go above and beyond. Even if I wasn't doing schoolwork, I was thinking about it, and I felt like IB particularly demanded that from me. By my second semester of grade 12, I had quit all my extracurricular activities and was studying 24/7, which I guess is similar to certain periods in university when you have to put energy into solely focusing on school.

The main difference now is that I feel like I actually have a healthy relationship with my school work; not only do I really enjoy what I'm learning, but I also recognize that it doesn't define my value as a person. I've been able to incorporate a lot more downtime into my schedule, which has helped me feel a lot more relaxed."

"I've also gotten to know my time budget better, which is huge! I actually spend less time studying because I know exactly how long it will take me to get something done, so in that sense my studying is much more rigorous and efficient. I would recommend that anyone transitioning to university should spend some time getting to know not only the content of their courses, but also how to do the work, like formatting a lab report or structuring an essay, for example. If you get these basics down early, you'll be way more efficient and you'll have more fun with your work later."

As a former IB student, Sneha is no stranger to learning in an enriched environment. I was curious **if she felt like IB offered her better preparation for university than a conventional high school curriculum would have.**

Sneha responded:

"Oh geez, I've had so many parents ask me this [laughs]. I think it really depends on the person. One of the benefits of IB is that it's a more rigorous academic program; in three out of six courses, you're learning university-level content and doing university-style work, so you're being held to a higher standard, but you also get more guidance than in a traditional high school setting. The transfer credits [applied to university] also come in handy. Personally, I'm a big nerd [laughs], so I enjoyed working with higher-level content in my classes.

However, it's not necessarily advantageous to be exposed to that level of work earlier. The high academic standards mean more stress and pressure, which can mean some students feel like they have less of a traditional, chill high school experience than other students. Ultimately, the biggest thing that IB offers is enhancing your skills and mindset as a student, which you can also build in university. If school is your main priority, IB can definitely help you achieve your goals, but I wouldn't say that it has a clear, definite advantage."

Given that we had talked a lot about school, I figured it was time to give Sneha a bit of a break. Since activism is how we first met, I asked her to **tell me about the type of volunteer work she had done and what activism means to her.**

"Oh wow, there's so much to talk about! The shape that my activism has taken has definitely changed over the years... I started out doing grassroots community work with a variety of organizations in Peterborough when I was 14 or 15, including the Kawartha World Issues Centre (KWIC), Building A Movement, Youth 4 Global Change (Y4GC), and the End Immigration Detention Network (EIDN). At that point, a lot of my work involved organizing events and facilitating workshops on social and environmental issues. I was very involved in my high school's social justice club too, which participated in campaigns like Amnesty International's Write for Rights and 1 Million Meals Peterborough. This was especially cool because I helped to lead the club in my senior years and got to choose our campaigns.

I was also part of Peterborough's municipal Youth Council in high school; however, I quickly realized that it was very different from what I had expected. We planned some fun events, but I felt it was very tokenized and I was looking to make a more tangible impact, so I started a group called Peterborough Youth Empowerment that aimed to increase youth involvement in advocacy issues. It initially started with a conversation I had in a coffee shop with a friend, but we ended up with a whole team that planned a conference. We even got the school board to declare a climate emergency! It was such a cool experience because I didn't know I could do that. It was also really rewarding to channel my frustration into something that has helped to create a platform for more youth advocacy in the community and continues to do so.

That being said, university has been a very different experience."

“

Activism is standing up for what you believe in with what you have.



"The lifestyle change and learning so much academically has changed my approach from being very grassroots to more of a policy-based angle. Community activism is very important and is still close to my heart, but I realized that I could create a longer-term impact if I had a role where I could create institutional and policy change. I'm currently working with the McMaster Students Union as an Advocacy & Policy Research Assistant, which involves doing student consultations regarding university policies, writing reports, and communicating with the university administration. I also assist with research at the Institute of Teaching and Learning on campus that aims to make classrooms more inclusive and accessible. These roles make me feel like I'm making the most of my skills and contributing to tangible change at my school. I'm also on the President's Advisory Committee for Building an Inclusive Committee - it's a mouthful, I know [laughs] - which includes faculty and students who discuss a variety of issues, organize campaigns, and manage funding for projects. It's a very collaborative space with lots of people in different disciplines and at different stages of their academic careers, so I feel lucky to be able to learn from that experience.

Ultimately, I'd say that activism is standing up for what you believe in with what you have. It can take whatever shape you want it to, depending on your capacity. Whether that's having a difficult conversation with your parents or starting an organization to address needs in your community, your contribution is valuable."

I had to admire Sneha's drive and dedication to her convictions. These are qualities that have only grown since I first met her when she was in early high school, and her passion for creating a better world is contagious. I wanted to know **if she had any key values or principles that she lived by** that helped her to realize her goals.

"Unabashed authenticity is so important to me, especially as a queer woman of colour. We're expected to perform a certain way in so many environments, whether that's in the classroom, our extracurriculars, in professional settings... I've gained so much from letting go of the fear of doing things wrong and just doing what feels right to me in terms of how I express myself and the kinds of work I'm doing. It's a learning curve, but something I deeply value.

I also think that the idea that it's okay to rest and okay to not always be taking on more has been a major principle for me. There is such a demand in our capitalist society to always be working and to determine our value based on our productivity, but your well-being should come first. Self care requires recognizing that well-being isn't just a remedy for stress; you can and should be proactive about it. It also means taking time to live in the way that you want to live."

"Finally, a key mantra that I live by is that 'if you do what you love, it will never feel like work.' I feel like we largely live in a culture of complaint at school and in our professional lives, and while there's lots of reasons to be critical, the energy you put out is the energy you get back. I firmly believe that if you put positivity in, you'll be able to actually put your labour into a place that is intentional. When I see an opportunity, I try to ask myself 'is this something that I'm going to actually enjoy?' versus 'will it look good on my resume?' or 'does it fit my 5-year plan?'. It's worked for me so far [laughs]."

I connected with a lot that Sneha said, and I made sure to jot down some of these points to remember when I think about my own work. But with such a busy schedule, I can't imagine it's easy for her to stay on top of all her commitments, in addition to staying so positive. I wanted to know **what Sneha did to keep herself organized, motivated, and mentally well** while working on so many things. I was also curious **if she had had to adapt any of these strategies during COVID-19**. Sneha responded:

"There's a great saying that we had in my poetry group before someone would go onstage: 'Remember why you wrote it.' I think that also applies to activism. For me, I find remembering why I started doing something and consciously choosing to do things that I love tends to give me energy rather than drain it. It's also really important to treat your well-being as its own commitment. This is definitely something that I'm still working on, but thinking about my wellness as a necessity and my job rather than an extra helps me feel a lot better when I need to take breaks.

Another tool that really helps me is writing things down, whether that's in a to-do list, a calendar... whatever! It's super helpful not only in managing what I have to do, but also managing my own levels of stress regarding the things I need to do.

In terms of COVID-19, I've gotta say that Zoom fatigue is very real [laughs]. The lack of separation between where I work and where I live the rest of my life is still something I'm grappling with; I think that's true for a lot of people.

I think that asking for help when I need it and doing things that bring good energy into my life has been helpful, but it's still a work in progress.

I'm very grateful though to have such a solid support system and be surrounded by people who understand me and my needs well. One way to build this is being really open with the people around you, whether that's friends, family, colleagues, or teachers. It's hard to be vulnerable with people, but being able to communicate 'this is where I'm at and this is what I need' is so important and something that will help you a lot in the long run."

I agreed that prioritizing wellness and being conscious of burnout were essential for managing stress, especially during a global pandemic. Current circumstances have changed so much about how we live and work, but returning to the basics of wellness, support, and doing what brings you joy have been crucial for many students navigating these times. Based on her experiences, I asked Sneha **what being a student means to her**. She thoughtfully responded:

"To be a student is to learn, at its very core. You can learn in so many ways, too; it doesn't necessarily have to be a classroom. I even learn from my walks outside! I think it's really a mindset of being open to what your life experiences have to teach you and being open to receiving that knowledge from whatever source it may come.

Being a student also means asking questions and being curious. You need to be okay with being uncomfortable and digging deeper sometimes. In traditional school settings, learning can be very prescriptive, but I really think about my own relationship with learning and how it impacts my worldview. Western learning systems emphasize certain kinds of knowledge as being 'official', but what about alternative forms like storytelling, conversations, or movement? I try to push myself to ask questions like 'whose story is being told?', 'whose knowledge is this?', and 'what does it mean to me?'"

I told Sneha that I thought these were really important questions to be asking, especially in the context of academic learning. University has also changed many of my own perceptions of what constitutes learning and knowledge, and thinking critically about the information we consume has only become more necessary in the age of disinformation. Before we wrapped up, I thanked Sneha again for the opportunity to catch up and hear her story. I also asked **if she had any advice for students preparing for college or university. Did she have any tips that she wished she had known in her first year?**

"Absolutely!! There's so much I wish I knew [laughs]... First and foremost, choose a program and school you love. It may not always be a professionally strategic choice, but your path will become a lot more clear. You should also be open to things changing. You'll be exposed to so much when you come to university, which can be scary, but be open and okay with not knowing everything right away. Things will work out, although maybe not in the way you expect.

Knowing where you can get support is also crucial. Going to school is super exciting - there's so much freedom and lots of new people - but it can be overwhelming to navigate all that change. Your time of need will come, so it's always good to plan ahead and prepare for that by knowing how you want to be supported and what resources are out there.

Be very patient with yourself; university is a huge jump! Maybe you're used to being a straight-A student and maybe that won't happen in first year, which is okay. The workload will probably be a lot more than in high school and academic standards are higher. Take the time you need and don't be afraid to ask for help. Even if you're struggling with the transition, trust that you will figure out what changes you need to feel better about your situation."





**A SPECIAL THANKS
TO OUR AMAZING
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AND CONTRIBUTOR

Sneha Wadhvani

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