

Academic Environment & Resources



It is not uncommon for some students to struggle as they make the transition from secondary school to university. International students have the added pressure of adjusting to a new culture. For some international students and scholars, the U.S. classroom and workplace may seem more informal than what they are used to. For example, students and professors, or workers and supervisors, may speak and dress quite casually. It is, however, important to recognize that there is still a respected hierarchy, and relationships remain formal.

Yale Resources

- [Academic Continuity for Students](#) [1]
- [Poorvu Center for Teaching & Learning](#) [2]
- [Yale College Advising Resources](#) [3]
- [Yale College Writing Center](#) [4]
- [Graduate Writing Center](#) [5]
- [GSAS Advising & Mentoring](#) [6]
- Your Academic Advisor and/or Dean
- Your School's Registrar's Office

Tips for Virtual Learning

Your school/program is your best resource - refer to their guidance on best practices for remote learning.

- [Effective Remote Learning Strategies](#) [7]
- [How-To Guides for Canvas, Zoom & other technologies](#) [8]
- [Library Resources](#) [9]
- [Student Guide to Time Zone Challenges](#) [10]
- [Use NameCoach](#) [11]

Tips for International Students

The U.S. Classroom

Many international students are surprised to find significant differences between classroom culture in the U.S. and in their home countries. Below you will find some common characteristics of classroom culture in the U.S., but keep in mind that, just as you will find students at Yale from a variety of backgrounds, faculty members also come from all over the world, with a wide range of teaching styles and expectations. You will need to treat each class and each professor as a new experience and adjust accordingly.

Active Class Participation is Desirable and Welcome

In many courses, professors even expect the students to ask questions and use critical reasoning. It is seen as part

Academic Environment & Resources

Published on Office of International Students & Scholars (<https://oiss.yale.edu>)

of the learning process. Complete silence may be viewed as a lack of interest or preparation. Be ready to ask questions when preparing for the class, jot down a couple of questions that you might ask. Some courses will even include a discussion session where students are expected to participate in an open discussion on a particular topic.

- [A First-Person Explanation of Why Some International Students Are Silent in the U.S. Classroom](#) [12]
- [4 Ways International Students Can Participate in Class](#) [13] (U.S. News article)
- [Participating in Class: Contributions that Count](#) [14] (Princeton)

Taking Initiative

In some courses, you may be asked to do most of the work yourself and the professor may have only a managerial role, as in the case of graduate seminar courses. It is common for teachers to serve as a guide in the student's learning. Students pursuing advanced degrees are particularly encouraged to critique theories, formulate models and interact with the professor.

- [Yale's Academic Strategies Program](#) [15] (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning)
- [Mastering Independent Work](#) [16] (Princeton)
- [Classes: Notetaking: Listening, Participation](#) [17] (Dartmouth)

Diverse Teaching Styles

The teaching style of the professor can determine the amount of student participation in each class. Some instructors prefer a more formal style of lecture with a possible question and answer period at the end. Others prefer a more conversational style and encourage interaction throughout the class. In general, instructors who are confident and experienced are comfortable with students who disagree. When expressing your views in class, be ready to defend your ideas.

- [Assessing Your Learning Style](#) [17] (Dartmouth, Academic Skills Center)

Hands-On Involvement

Classes can sometimes have a practical as well as a theoretical component. Lectures account for the theoretical, and workshops, labs, or study/work groups take care of the practical. Instruction in science and mathematics tends to be of a more formal lecture style, but applied courses or even theoretical courses, can include hands-on projects that actively involve the students.

- [Biology: I thought I knew everything \(but I still got a bad grade\)](#) [18] (UPenn)

Responsibility and Self-Motivation

Students are expected to be motivated to learn for the sake of learning, not just to receive the highest grade. Therefore, when a reading is assigned, a professor expects the student to do it on their own. Anything you are assigned, even if it is not covered in class, might appear on your exams. Keep in mind that in the U.S., courses are not designed simply for students to pass exams. It is expected that you will attend every class because of self-motivation.

- [Study Habits and Test Anxiety](#) [19] (St. Mary's)

Student-Professor Relationships

Professors may have a social relationship with students outside of the classroom. They may go for coffee together, or have other kinds of social outings. However, it is still expected that students will be respectful of the student-professor relationship within the classroom and will continue to meet all deadlines, do all homework, and attend all classes. Extra help or attention in no way signifies that a professor will treat the student differently when evaluating homework, papers or tests of any kind. Also, American professors generally do not mix work with social time. If you become friendly with your instructor, be ready to interact more formally when in more professional student-

professor context - such as in the professor's office or in the classroom with other students.

American Students

American students may behave towards professors in ways that seem disrespectful. In class they may look sleepy or sit in very relaxed positions, eat food, be inattentive, or even noisy. American professors may not appreciate this behavior, but it is often tolerated because of the American concept of individual expression. Respect for the professor is often shown in subtle ways, by choice of vocabulary or tone of voice for example.

Ask if You Don't Understand

If a student is confused about something in the class, it is expected that they will ask the professor before or after class. If the issue requires a longer conversation, the student may make an appointment to see the professor during office hours. In U.S. academic culture, there is no shame associated with not understanding something in the course, even if it has been presented in a class lecture. Professors respect students who work hard towards fully understanding the material, so don't wait until just before the exam to seek clarification. Ask as soon as you realize that you don't completely understand the material.

- [Getting Help from Your Professor](#) [20] (ThoughtCo)
- [How to Ask Your Professor for Help](#) [21] (University of Arizona)

Keys to Success

Understand that Learning and Adaptation Take Time

It will take some time to adjust when you first arrive, and your first semester may prove particularly challenging. As time goes on, you will adapt to your surroundings, your English language skills will improve, and this will be reflected in your grades.

In all domains of learning, the development of expertise occurs only with major investments of time, and the amount of time it takes to learn material is roughly proportional to the amount of material being learned (Singley and Anderson, 1989) [...] Although many people believe that "talent" plays a role in who becomes an expert in a particular area, even seemingly talented individuals require a great deal of practice in order to develop their expertise (Ericsson et al., 1993).

[How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School.](#) [22]

- [Getting Past Perfectionism](#) [23] (Princeton)
- [64 Things We Wish We Knew As College Freshmen](#) [24] (Huffpost)
- [Making the Transition to College](#) [25] (Princeton)
- [Seven Things I Wish I Knew Before Going to Graduate School](#) [26] (Alan Henry, *Lifehacker*)

Choose Your Classes Carefully: Pace Yourself

Be appropriately ambitious – too many courses or too many challenging courses could cause you to become discouraged. Talk with your freshman or academic adviser as well as fellow students, and take advantage of the "shopping" period to select a balance of demanding and less demanding courses. In some cases, it may be in your best interest to withdraw from a course, however ALWAYS consult with an OISS adviser before dropping any courses.

Learners [...] may need to take time to explore underlying concepts and to generate connections to other information they possess. Attempts to cover too many topics too quickly may hinder learning and subsequent transfer because students (a) learn only isolated sets of facts that are not organized and connected or (b) are introduced to organizing principles that they cannot grasp because they lack enough specific knowledge to make them meaningful.

[How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School.](#) [22]

Investigate

Inform yourself and remain open-minded in order to understand different points of view. Question your own viewpoint, research a variety of sources, and experiment with new ideas.

- [The Important of Stupidity in Scientific Research](#) [27] (Journal of Cell Science, 2008)

Practice 'Active' Learning

Active learning is different from passive learning, which relies heavily on memorization. Research has found that the ability to remember is not the same as understanding a topic. The higher your degree of understanding, the higher the probability that you will be able to transfer the knowledge onto other areas of your academic life.

...learning is most effective when people engage in “deliberate practice” that includes active monitoring of one’s learning experiences (Ericsson et al., 1993). Monitoring involves attempts to seek and use feedback about one’s progress. Feedback has long been identified as important for successful learning (see, e.g., Thorndike, 1913)...

[How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience and School.](#) [22]

- [Active Learning](#) [28] (Harvard)
- [Active Reading: Comprehension and Rate](#) [17] (Dartmouth)

Manage Your Time Wisely

Use a calendar to create a study schedule and keep track of due dates for homework assignments, papers, projects, and exams. Work hard beginning on the first day of classes so that you don’t fall behind. Prioritize and maintain a balance between school work, regular meals, sleep and recreation.

- [Yale's Academic Strategies Program](#) [15] (Center for Teaching and Learning)
- [Managing your time](#) [29] (Dartmouth, Academic Skills Center)
- [Where do the hours go?](#) [30] (gradPSYCH Vol.11, No.2)
- [One of these days I'll stop procrastinating](#) [31] (UPenn)

Ask if You Don't Understand

If a student is confused about something in the class, it is expected that they will ask the professor before or after class. If the issue requires a longer conversation, the student may make an appointment to see the professor during office hours. In U.S. academic culture, there is no shame associated with not understanding something in the course, even if it has been presented in a class lecture. Professors respect students who work hard towards fully understanding the material, so don’t wait until just before the exam to seek clarification. Ask as soon as you realize that you don’t completely understand the material.

Be Consistent

Maintain a high GPA (grade point average) by treating each class as important, not only the classes you like most.

Your Academic Adviser

For Yale students, the academic adviser plays a key role in your studies and it is important to choose your adviser carefully and strive to build and maintain a good relationship. Advice specific to your Yale affiliation can be

found below:

Undergraduates

There are a lot of advising resources for Yale College students, some available to you in your freshman year and others throughout your four years at Yale. Together, deans, faculty, advisers and peer mentors/advisers welcome the opportunity to guide you through your program of study at Yale. [Advising resources described in detail](#) [32].

The most important point is to make sure you take advantage of these resources. Here is a quick (though not complete) guide to the different advising roles for Yale College freshmen.

Residential College Dean

- Oversees freshman counseling and faculty advising; provides support in personal and academic matters
- Can help you work through problems with a specific course, even talking with your professor if necessary
- Handles rooming draws, rooming problems, excuses for missed classes, and more
- Available for consultation if you find you have any serious problems affecting your life at Yale.

Freshman Counselor (FROCOS)

- Seniors from your individual college who live in freshman housing along with the freshman class
- Provide less formal support and advice in personal and academic matters
- Approve and sign your course schedule, along with your dean and freshman adviser
- Arrange “blue-booking” get-togethers in your first week at Yale (intended to help you choose courses)
- On-call Thursday through Saturday nights, and will take care of you if you become ill or need assistance
- Will not seek you out, or interfere in your life, so don't wait for them to come to you - go when you need advice or help with anything

Freshman Faculty Adviser

- Faculty member affiliated with your college who is there to review and approve your course schedule
- Meet at least three times: at an introductory dinner and to approve your schedule each semester
- Provides guidance in course selection
- Find more details in the Freshman Handbook
- At the end of your freshman year, you will choose a sophomore adviser
- Eventually you will choose an adviser from the department of your major
- Take advantage of the ‘shopping period’ to compare the styles of different professors
- ‘Shopping’ may spark an interest in a field never before considered as a major; attend courses within your intended major, or within areas of interest

Graduates

For graduate and professional students, your adviser not only helps guide you in choosing your courses, but also oversees your graduate work. If you are pursuing a Ph.D., they will supervise your research, serve on your various evaluation committees, and approve your dissertation topic.

Here is some helpful information and advice given by international graduate students at Yale:

1. **Take your time.** Your department will offer a ‘shopping period’, which can last up to two years, before you choose your adviser. This will vary depending on your school or department.
2. **Make an informed decision.** Talk with experienced students and observe classes. Get a sense of the working styles and personalities of the professors whom you are considering to be your adviser. As one student said, “It’s like a small marriage. You want to gather as much information as possible before you choose.”
3. **Meet.** Arrange a meeting with a prospective adviser. Prepare your ideas, and arrange a meeting to discuss your study plans with a prospective adviser. This will help you understand the viability of a possible long-term relationship.

4. **Be flexible.** Don't discount the possibility of choosing an adviser who seems to have research interests that don't match your own. It could still be a good fit. Professors (and especially senior faculty) have broad knowledge in their chosen field.
5. **Take initiative.** Your adviser is usually very busy, and will most likely not come to you to ask how you are doing. You should be proactive in your work, and take the opportunity to talk with your adviser whenever possible. They want to help you with your academic problems. It is important to ask questions if you feel you need answers in order to proceed with your work.
6. **Be independent.** Don't ask questions about everything. Work to answer what you can on your own, and make sure that when you do approach your adviser with questions, you have thought them out carefully. In developing a good relationship, it will take time to understand the exact balance between autonomy and dependence.
7. **Be diligent.** Don't expect your adviser to remind you of deadlines for papers, exams or any aspect of your work. You are expected to take responsibility and ask questions if you are unclear about when something is due.
8. **Be proactive.** Be responsible for your own studies. "Self-activation" is the way one graduate student described it. In the U.S. there is an emphasis on thinking for oneself, not on memorizing facts. Show that you are thinking by not being afraid to argue or criticize (as long as you can justify your position with facts and reason).
9. **Be prepared.** Write out your ideas before meeting with your adviser. Make sure you can clearly explain your ideas. Be ready to justify and defend everything.
10. **Be appropriate.** A gift for your adviser is a warm gesture, and a nice symbol of appreciation. However, a gift does not mean special treatment. As informal as Americans can seem, it is said, "Never mix business with pleasure." Giving gifts or becoming friendly with your adviser outside of an academic setting does not mean that you will be afforded any extra considerations.
11. **Be professional.** Your adviser may insist that you call them by their first name. This is not unusual in American culture and does not signify a close personal relationship. Even within a professional or academic setting the use of first names between subordinates and their superiors is normal. If you are uncertain as to whether or not to call your adviser by their first name, it is better to err on the side of formality and address your adviser as "Professor [insert last name]", and only use first names when instructed to. You can also ask, "How do you prefer to be called?" if you are uncertain.

Scholars

Scholar PI/Supervisor

Maintain and build a good relationship with your work supervisor by setting an example of professionalism and communicating clearly and openly. Begin by understanding the norms and expectations of your lab or office. What are expected work hours? Are there any departmental meetings that you are required to attend? What protocols must one follow in the case of an unplanned absence or lateness?

Always ask if you are unclear about any of the policies and procedures. The work environment, and your supervisor may be very casual in dress or attitude, but this is in keeping with university culture. Be careful not to mistake the informality for a lack of respect or seriousness. U.S. culture is a more informal culture, but hierarchies still exist and are respected. Don't assume a first name basis for example, or come to a meeting unprepared because it doesn't seem serious. It is much better to be too formal, than too informal.

Source URL: <https://oiss.yale.edu/campus-community-life/for-students/making-yale-your-home/academic-environment-resources>

Links

[1] <https://academiccontinuity.yale.edu/guiding-principles-students>

[2] <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/>

[3] <https://yalecollege.yale.edu/academics/academic-advising>

[4] <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergraduates/writing-tutoring-and-programs>

[5] <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/graduate-students/gwl-consultations-written-and-oral-communication/writing->

consultations

- [6] <https://gsas.yale.edu/resources-students/advising-mentoring>
- [7] <https://academiccontinuity.yale.edu/students/learning-strategies>
- [8] <https://academiccontinuity.yale.edu/students/how-guides-students>
- [9] <https://academiccontinuity.yale.edu/students/library-resources>
- [10] <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergraduates/academic-strategies/student-guides/time-zone-challenges>
- [11] <https://registrar.yale.edu/students/name-policy-and-use>
- [12] <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-and-learning/a-first-person-explanation-of-why-some-international-students-are-silent-in-the-u-s-classroom/>
- [13] <https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/international-student-counsel/2013/08/22/4-ways-international-students-can-participate-in-class>
- [14] <https://mcgraw.princeton.edu/participating-in-class>
- [15] <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/academic-strategies-program>
- [16] <https://mcgraw.princeton.edu/node/2226>
- [17] <https://students.dartmouth.edu/academic-skills/>
- [18] [https://oiss.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/studying%20bio%20\(W\).pdf](https://oiss.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/studying%20bio%20(W).pdf)
- [19] <https://www.stmarys-ca.edu/tutorial-and-academic-skills-center/additional-resources/test-taking-strategies>
- [20] <https://www.thoughtco.com/getting-help-from-your-professor-1685268>
- [21] <https://www.uagc.edu/blog/how-to-ask-your-professor-for-help>
- [22] <https://www.nap.edu/read/9853/chapter/6>
- [23] <https://principedia.princeton.edu/strategies/getting-past-perfectionism/>
- [24] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/things-we-wish-we-knew-as-freshmen_us_55c38e8ae4b0923c12bbda4d
- [25] <https://mcgraw.princeton.edu/transition-to-college>
- [26] <http://lifehacker.com/seven-things-i-wish-i-knew-before-going-to-graduate-sch-1609488711>
- [27] <http://jcs.biologists.org/content/joces/121/11/1771.full.pdf>
- [28] <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/active-learning>
- [29] <https://students.dartmouth.edu/academic-skills/learning-resources/time-management>
- [30] <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/03/hours.aspx>
- [31] [https://oiss.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/procrastination%20\(W\).pdf](https://oiss.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/procrastination%20(W).pdf)
- [32] <https://advising.yalecollege.yale.edu/>