



## Masking Policy and Procedures

The FAS [requires](#) that 3-layer procedure masks be worn in all classrooms. As noted in the [Harvard University Guidance for On-Campus Activity](#) [HarvardKey login required], [eating and drinking are prohibited](#) in all classrooms because masks must be worn at all times.

In certain cases, [Harvard-approved clear masks](#) should be used instead of the ordinary masks:

- First, to accommodate disabilities. The Accessible Education Office will work with students who are Deaf or hard of hearing to ensure that their classrooms are equipped with clear masks for everyone; instructors who need a similar accommodation should [contact University Disability Resources](#) (UDR) to arrange it.
- Second, for pedagogical reasons. Clear masks are useful in courses, such as language courses, where attention is paid to the mouth. Instructors of such courses may ask their departments to order clear masks for them, and the departments will be reimbursed by the FAS.

## Guidance on Teaching while Masked

Teaching in any medium, whether online or in-person, involves a range of communication and feedback, visual as well as auditory, and emotional as well as intellectual. The fact that we will be teaching and learning in masks may make it more challenging to see and be seen, to hear and be heard, and for the totality of what we wish to say—the tone, as well as the words—to land with our listeners. As noted above, this may be especially challenging for students and instructors who, either for reasons of accessibility or because of the nature of the course material, depend upon reading lips and/or facial expressions.

The fact that we will be wearing masks in our classrooms may also be challenging insofar as it is another reminder that we are transitioning back to in-person teaching (and communal, on-campus living) at a time when the delta variant of COVID-19 is not yet fully contained.<sup>1</sup> Though [Harvard College has given students clear guidance around COVID protocols](#), your students might arrive to class somewhat anxious about or uncertain how to interact with each other in an enclosed, indoor space, and they are likely to exhibit different levels of comfort with the expectations around masking, social distancing, and so on.<sup>2</sup> The changing guidance from public health authorities has left us all a little uncertain at one point or another about best practices, and students might even be self-conscious about asking for clarification, lest their classmates judge them for not knowing the current protocol. As a result, they might choose to sit uncomfortably rather than ask whether they may step outside for a mask break or to take a sip of water.

Because anxiety, discomfort, and distraction are at cross purposes with learning, it's important to be attentive to creating an environment in which your students feel free to share their questions and concerns without feeling judged or ashamed for not knowing how to navigate this unprecedented situation. This involves helping them to get to know each other and to feel that it's not only acceptable, but virtuous, to speak up when they have questions, can't hear well, or would like to share how they are feeling.

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<sup>1</sup> As psychologist Susan Krauss Whitbourne has noted, "At a time when people need to reassure themselves as much as possible by communicating and receiving empathy, the channel of communication provided by the face is now severely limited." Susan Krauss Whitbourne, ["4 Ways to Communicate When You Can't See Someone's Face,"](#) *Psychology Today* (21 April 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See also the [protocols students are expected to follow](#) upon initially returning to campus.

In what follows, we share some suggestions for how instructors can best manage masking in the classroom. We intend for this to be a living document; if you wish to suggest an addition or revision, please feel free to email us at [bokcenter@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:bokcenter@fas.harvard.edu).

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## Create a classroom environment conducive to learning

### Get to know your students, and create shared norms from your very first meeting

- Invite students to share pictures or short videos of themselves without masks. You could do this in a number of ways—for example, by asking students to post a picture of themselves to a discussion thread in your Canvas site, or the course's Slack channel (if you're using Slack). You might also adopt one of the many apps that allow students to share short self-introduction videos; we would recommend [Flipgrid](#) for this purpose, and would be happy to consult with you about setting up your account. You are also welcome to invite students, as their comfort allows, to meet you for office hours outdoors or on Zoom, so that you can spend some time together unmasked.
- Create opportunities for students to signal to you and their peers how they wish to interact with each other. You can do this quietly, in non-verbal ways that will spare you having to interrupt class to monitor your students' wellbeing. You might, for example, share a Google Form with your students, which they can use to alert you to any concerns or questions they might have about masking or being in close proximity to other students. (Google Forms can be deployed anonymously, as well, if you think students might be reluctant to ask what they perceive to be "dumb" questions.)
- Use time in your first class meeting to create explicit group agreements about how you will interact from the start of the semester. Set up low-stress methods for alerting people if they are speaking too softly/unclearly, normalize admitting when you are uncertain about how to behave, and speak openly with students about assuming best intentions.
- Consider developing a gentle but clear way to remind students to obey good mask protocols. While it is not your job to be the mask police, if you were to observe a student wearing a mask incorrectly it would be appropriate for you to note how they could rectify the situation and ask them to do so.

### Check in with students and revisit norms throughout the semester

- You might start each class with a "temperature check," in which students use something like an emoji (or colored cards, or a symbol on a reusable name tent) to share how they're feeling that day "behind the mask."
- Revisit your group agreements at periodic intervals, reminding students of them and revising/updating them as necessary.

- When you collect midterm feedback on your teaching, consider including a few questions specifically about how masking and other COVID protocols are affecting students' experience of the classroom. Do they have suggestions for how you might communicate with each other more effectively?

## **Make sure that you and your students can be seen, heard, and understood**

### Speak slowly and clearly while facing your students

Masks may make it more challenging for students to hear and understand what you're saying. Speaking more slowly, in an exaggerated "presenter mode" will help your students follow you more easily. Be sure to emphasize important words and concepts. Consider trying to open your mouth more widely than you would when speaking without a mask to help project your voice more effectively.

- Our Bok Guide on "[How Can I Use My Voice to Speak Clearly](#)" breaks down components of speaking that can help make you easier to follow, whether speaking with a mask or without one.
- Invite students to let you know if they are having trouble hearing or following you; they will feel more comfortable sharing feedback on your speaking style when masked if you signal you are open to hearing from them.

### Reinforce the spoken word with multiple mediums

Masks do not merely quiet or muffle speech—they also remove visual cues about our affect and prevent lip-reading. Consider deploying multiple modalities of communication in your classroom, using writing and other visual means of communication in addition to (or instead of) oral communication.

- "Back up" the spoken portion of your presentation by reproducing key text, terms, etc. that might be unfamiliar or hard to understand through a mask on slides, handouts, and/or the board.
- Consider shifting some of the communication and collaboration that might have happened orally to textual formats—you might deploy technologies like shared Google Docs, Jamboards, etc. to aid communication.

### Use gestures and body language strategically

Now more than ever, it may be in your interest to use clear, demonstrative gestures to "direct" the choreography of your discussions, to telegraph your enthusiasm for what you and/or your students are saying, and to signal moments for student response.

- Be aware of how you arrange and occupy the physical space of your classroom—not only so that you can respect students' varying levels of comfort with physical proximity, but also as a signal to shift the dynamics of the conversation. For example, if one area of the room seems to be disengaged from the conversation, you might position yourself nearer to those students so that they are drawn into the conversational flow.
- Use gestures to signal or model the behavior you wish to prompt in your students. When asking students for their questions, for example, raise your own hand.
- If using a whiteboard or chalkboard, take care to spend as little time as possible with your back to your students. Speaking into the board never makes for great communication, but it's even less effective when one is also wearing a mask.

### Consider amplification

- Large lecture halls will all come equipped with a microphone for the instructor, as well as one for the students. Consider microphones in other venues, where you might not otherwise have used them; you can email [ess@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ess@fas.harvard.edu) to explore your options.

### **Check for understanding**

There is at least one thing that remains unchanged by the pandemic: putting a lot of effort into optimizing *how* you are communicating will come to nought if *what* you are communicating is not leading to more understanding and learning in your students. Whether you are masked or unmasked, it is always a good idea to solicit feedback on your students' comprehension in real time.

### Read eyes, eyebrows, and body language—and confirm verbally

There is a lot to be learned from the physical features of your students not hidden by masks—from their eyes, the disposition of their eyebrows (are they raised? furrowed?), and their body language (are they leaning back, disengaged? Hunched over their notes in puzzlement?). But it's also easy to misread these physical cues. A student furiously engaged in taking notes might be soaking up everything you've said—or might be "performing" absorption in an effort to dissuade you from calling on them because they *don't* understand what you've just said. Likewise, a student staring at the ceiling might be daydreaming—but might also be deeply engaged in processing what their classmate is saying.

- Though it might feel a bit awkward at first, consider ways you might call on a student, name the physical cue you're seeing, and ask them to confirm or correct you. "John—it looks to me like you're not sure you agree with the argument we've been outlining. Am I reading you correctly?"

### Use polling, minute papers, and other classroom assessment techniques

- [PollEverywhere](#) is a powerful and widely-adopted application that allows you to conduct real-time, in-class polls (and display the results via PowerPoint, should you so desire). If you have become accustomed to Zoom polling, you likely will find PollEverywhere to be even more versatile and easy to use once you have had a little practice. You might want to use periodic polls to check for students' understanding ("Given what we've just learned, what will happen if we increase the demand curve...?"); it also works well to do pre- and post-tests to see whether students have changed their minds about something debatable as a result of what they've done in class.
- Minute papers (and other, similar [classroom assessment techniques](#) [CATs]) can be used to find out what students feel they have learned, and on which points they remain uncertain or confused. Asking students to respond to a few questions—e.g. What's one thing you've learned? What's one thing you didn't understand?—at the end of class, whether on a slip of paper or through a Google Form, can help you calibrate your next class meeting. You could also ask students whether they have any feedback on how masking may have affected their ability to learn.

### **For policy questions**

- [Final FAS Fall 2021 Plan](#)
- [Harvard University Guidance for On-Campus Activity](#) (HarvardKey login required)
- [Harvard's Plan for a Safe Campus Reopening](#)

### For further reading

- [“23 Tricks and Tips for Teaching with Masks,”](#) University of Michigan LSA Technology Services.
- Jim Gee, [“Let’s Talk Teaching: Mask Up!”](#) Illinois State University Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology (11 August 2021).
- Jamie Landau, [“How to Teach F2F With a Mask and Create Caring Classrooms,”](#) *Inside Higher Ed* (26 August 2020).
- SLATE (Harvard Kennedy School), [“Guide to Teaching with Masks”](#) (August 2021).
- Susan Krauss Whitbourne, [“4 Ways to Communicate When You Can't See Someone's Face,”](#) *Psychology Today* (21 April 2020).