



SLATE Teaching Guide: Teaching with Masks

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For the Fall 2021 semester, all members of the [Harvard University](#) and [Harvard Kennedy School](#) communities will be required to wear face coverings while in public spaces, including classrooms. While teaching with face coverings, specifically masks, may present some challenges - such as muffling the voice, obscuring large portions of the face, and fogging up eye glasses - these challenges can be addressed through preparation, adaptation, flexibility, and a bit of creativity.

To help you begin preparing to teach in a masked classroom environment, SLATE has pulled together a list of suggestions based on the work of colleagues at other institutions and on our experiences working with faculty who taught on campus in Spring 2021. For more help on teaching with masks and planning for your teaching this semester, please contact [Erin Baumann](#), Associate Director of Professional Pedagogy.

Find the most comfortable setup

Choose a comfortable mask that has a nose-bridge, so that it will not slip down while you are talking for long periods of time or fog up if you are wearing glasses. (Note: If fogging glasses is a particular concern for you, we recommend you consider using an [anti-fog spray](#) to mitigate the problem). Consider bringing extra masks so that they remain dry and clean, especially if you are teaching multiple classes in a single day.

Issues around accessibility can be amplified in a space where participants are masked. Therefore, you may consider using a mask with a clear panel, so that students who are deaf or hard of hearing may have an easier time understanding you. The [Harvard University Face Covering Guidance](#) mentions two examples of clear masks ([here](#) and [here](#)). (Note: Fogging can be an issue with clear window masks, so we recommend trying using an anti-fog spray).

Also, keep a bottle of water with you and be sure to hydrate. Talking for an extended period of time while wearing a mask can dry out your mouth and throat. So to help you maintain your voice and your comfort, be sure to keep a beverage handy and take sips as necessary (you are permitted to lower your mask to take brief drinks).

Monitor your verbal and non-verbal communication

Student-instructor interaction will be a bit different in this new setting. Because masks muffle sound, plan to speak slowly and enunciate deliberately. This technique can especially benefit students for whom English is a second language and/or may be [hard of hearing](#). You might start off each class (and periodically pause) to ask students if they can hear you (especially students seated

at the back of the room). Likewise, when a student asks a question, you should repeat the question for the entire class to hear. Talk to your students about amplifying their voices and politely signaling when they can't hear something.

In the Spring 2021 pilot of on-campus teaching, some students reported that it can be more difficult to hear both faculty and fellow students speak in a masked environment. Therefore, we strongly recommend you use the lavalier (clip) microphone at all times while wearing a mask.

Because masks also hide much of our face, your posture, hand gestures, and gaze are all crucial forms of [paralinguistic expression](#). Therefore, you should plan to get a bit more theatrical in your teaching! Practice “talking” with your eyebrows and “smiling” with your eyes (in the words of model Tyra Banks, “Smize!”). And, think about deliberately exaggerating your physical gestures and making eye contact with students to enhance their understanding of your words.

Additionally, consider the balance of verbal and written information in any given class period. Can you present additional information in written form, like a handout, to reduce the potential for misunderstanding?

Finally, instructional cues - which are words and phrases that draw students' attention to particularly important, challenging, or counterintuitive points - can help students identify key ideas and organize information more effectively. Instructional cues can be a valuable complement to the paralinguistic expressions mentioned above, helping students to better cognitively process the lesson and your narration of it. Examples of simple instructional cues that you can incorporate into your teaching include:

- *This is a tricky concept, but it's an important one.*
- *Most people assume X, but in fact...*
- *If there's one idea I want you to take away from today's lecture, it's...*
- *Remember how last week we talked about X? When Y is related to X in the following way...*

Build rapport with your students

Masks can make the classroom feel emotionally isolating. However, there are ways to mitigate this challenge and build rapport with your students, such as by:

- *Creating a welcome video and posting it on your Canvas site.* You can also invite students to create their own introduction videos. This exercise allows students and instructors to see one another without masks, thus humanizing (masked) interactions in the classroom.
- *Share a picture of yourself without a mask on the first day of class,* so students get a chance to see you and know you a bit better. You might also consider asking students to share pictures of themselves without masks in a Canvas discussion board.
- *Co-create a class constitution or classroom contract* with your students, giving them power to discuss matters like how to indicate that someone may be speaking too softly or that someone's comment was particularly powerful, or how to handle issues like technology in

the classroom. For an example of how to structure and manage a classroom contract discussion with your students, see this [example from Emily Click](#) of the Harvard Divinity School.

Incorporate additional checks for understanding

You may already use teaching techniques like polling, “minute papers,” and other ungraded methods for assessing student learning in real time in the classroom. These [Classroom Assessment Techniques](#) are even more important when masked, as we lose many of the non-verbal cues that can indicate students' comprehension (or confusion). Simple checks for understanding include:

- *Hand-raising* (if it's important that students see one another's responses in real time)
- *Real-time polling* using [Poll Everywhere](#) (if it's important that students submit answers in real time, anonymously)
- *Exit tickets* (if you'd like to collect individualized feedback from students at the end of class and process it after class; for some examples, [see here](#))
- *Minute paper* (if you'd like to provide students with opportunities for reflection in real time; for some examples, [see here](#))

References and Additional Resources

- [Harvard College](#), Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, “Back Again: The Return to In-Person Teaching”
- [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#), Teaching & Learning Lab, “Teaching with a Mask: Best Practices”
- [Brown University](#), Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, “Classroom Assessment”
- [Illinois State](#), “Let's Talk Teaching: Mask Up!”
- [Indiana University](#), “3 Tips on Teaching While Wearing a Mask”
- [Inside Higher Ed](#), “How to Teach F2F With a Mask and Create Caring Classrooms”
- [Psychology Today](#), “4 Ways to Communicate When You Can't See Someone's Face”
- [Roanoke College](#), The Teaching Collaborative, “Teaching in Face Masks and Shields with Social Distancing - A Non-Scientific Study”
- [University of Georgia](#), “From the Expert: Tips on Lecturing With a Mask”
- [University of South Florida](#), Academy for Teaching and Learning Excellence, “Teaching with Face Masks”
- [Yale University](#), Poorvu Center for Teaching & Learning, “Classroom Assessment Techniques”