

Hayley's Declassified School Survival Guide: Pandemic Edition

Hello, everyone! My name is Hayley Hoffman, and I am a third-year Ph.D. student in our college's graduate program. Every summer, I teach journalism/mass media at Kentucky's Governor's Scholars Program (GSP). This year's GSP marked the first in-person learning experience to take place in Kentucky since mid-March. We were the state's "Healthy at School" guinea pigs, essentially, and all 1000+ students, staff, and faculty managed to get through the summer unscathed. As such, I thought I'd put together a Q&A guide to teaching during the pandemic based off my experiences.

Q: What was it like to wear a mask for an extended period of time?

A: I won't lie to you—it was difficult as first. Wearing a mask for a day at a time is nothing like wearing it for an hour or two to get groceries or run errands. It's awkward and uncomfortable at first. My advice for getting used to a mask is as follows:

1. I highly recommend wearing a mask around your house for 3-4 hours at a time in the days leading up to August 17. When getting ready for GSP, for example, I wore my mask anytime I was packing or lesson planning. This is helpful for two reasons: one, it gets you used to wearing a mask for an extended period of time; and two, it helps you mentally associate the act of wearing a mask with school.
2. If you haven't already done so, start keep a mask in your car at all times so that if you forget one that day, you have a backup ready to go. To help you remember your mask as you get ready for school, hang it on the doorknob of the door you'll pass through to get to your car. You're certain to see it and grab it there.
3. Find what mask is most comfortable for you prior to August 17 (see my recommendations below).

Q: How did you enforce wearing masks in the classroom?

A: Fortunately, just as it is at UK, wearing a mask was a non-negotiable condition of attending GSP. Most students were great about following the rules and only removed their masks in public when they were eating or drinking; however, there were a few outliers who pushed the boundaries. If a student tended to remove their mask for an extended period of time to take a drink from their water bottle and started talking to folks without their mask on, I asked them to step into the hallway with their water bottle to limit exposure. If a student wore their mask below their nose, I kindly reminded the class as a whole that proper mask etiquette means covering your chin, mouth, and nose. The recommended UK engagement script should be helpful, too.

Remember, you are a model for your students. If you want them to wear a mask while learning, wear a mask while teaching. If you want them to wear a mask properly, wear your mask properly. 95 percent of the time, it really is that simple.

Q: Were there any issues with mask compliance outside of class?

A: Oh, for sure. The students at GSP were rising high school seniors who hadn't been around anyone other than their family for four months. They were desperate to build relationships in

the only way they know—face-to-face, with close physical contact. It was common to see students leaving their masks off after eating so that they could “see what everyone looked like” during down time. The GSP geotag on Instagram later revealed to us that they were taking pictures in close proximity to one another without masks throughout their time on campus. Look, you were the age of your students once. You probably did some reckless things that you now regret because you thought you were invincible, too. Things are going to happen that are outside of your control that are going to increase your exposure to COVID-19.

Because you can't control everything that happens outside your classroom, focus on what you *can* control inside your classroom. Enforce the mask policy. Encourage students to sanitize their hands often and keep their distance from one another. Remind them that we're doing this not just for their safety, but for your safety and the safety of our communities too. With any luck, they'll listen.

Q: Did students have trouble hearing you with a mask?

A: Absolutely, at first! I made sure to tell my students on the first day of class that if they couldn't hear me, they should tell me. When teaching in a mask, elevate your “teacher voice” just a few decibels higher and be willing to adjust based on student feedback.

Q: Did you have trouble hearing students when they spoke in class?

A: Yes! On the first day of class, I politely reminded students to speak up when introducing themselves to the class and encouraged them to not be shy in saying to one another, “I can't hear you well, can you please speak up?” After the second or third day of class, the students had found the appropriate volume at which to speak and it was never an issue again. Be patient with your students—they are adjusting to this new normal, just like you.

The key to teaching during the pandemic, I believe, is to extend empathy and grace wherever you can. Reminding students to speak up can get repetitive and frustrating—when in doubt, be kind.

Q: What kinds of activities worked best in a socially-distant classroom setting?

A: I was actually surprised by how much group work we were still able to do in class. For example, I'm a big fan of think-pair-share, and I was able to have students turn in their seats to talk to the folks next to them, behind them, etc., to discuss in small groups. I was also able to have students complete group projects (e.g., podcast editing, video editing) in class by having group members sit in adjacent seats to one another and be intentional about speaking up, using gestures, etc., when working together. Any group activity serves as an excellent lesson in effective group and interpersonal communication, because students can't depend on the tools (like facial expressions) they've used before.

Anything involving shared or communal items, like drawing tools or props, is a big no-no, of course. Presentations work best via Zoom, where full faces can be seen and gestures/movement can be used without crossing social distancing boundaries. My rule of

thumb, when planning activities and assignments, was that if I thought it might make an immunocompromised student uncomfortable, I wouldn't do it.

Q: What did students have to say about wearing a mask for the entire school day?

A: At the end of each week I was on campus, the students noted that they struggled at first to adjust to wearing a mask all the time. They would often forget to bring a mask or hand sanitizer with them when they left their dorms and have to race back before class to grab them. While they all did eventually adapt to wearing a mask, they noted that constantly being alert and adapting to social distancing requirements throughout the day was mentally and emotionally exhausting. They were excited to be back in a classroom learning in-person again, but it took a toll on them. The novelty of being physically in-class wears off quickly.

I wholeheartedly agree with that take. Constantly remaining alert of all of the guidelines was draining; it was easily the most tired I've ever been while teaching.

Q: What masks do you recommend for teaching?

A: I taught in a variety of different masks this summer. These were my favorite ones:

- [Bailey Blue Clothing](#) (\$9-\$11/mask): Super soft, t-shirt quality material. For every mask they sell, they donate one to someone in need. These masks are without a doubt my favorite. I can't recommend them highly enough!
- [Out of Print](#) (\$12/mask): Soft, lightweight but high-quality material. On backorder but worth the wait. For every mask they sell, they donate a book to a community in need.
- [Athleta](#) (\$30 for a pack of 5): Breathable material with adjustable nose piece.
- Avoid any mask with an elastic earpiece if you can. The elastic wears on your ears fairly quickly.