

Flexible Approaches for Setting Deadlines

Context and purpose: Accessible deadline practices

One consideration in the development of access-forward teaching practices is determining an approach to deadlines that work for the instructor and students alike. **Flexible deadlines** (like other flexible teaching practices) increase accessibility and equity, offer choice and agency to students, and strengthen teaching and learning relationships and communities. However, the full absence of structure or expectation can create barriers for students, especially those who experience difficulties with some kinds of executive functioning and project management or who hold responsibilities beyond their courseloads (e.g., employment, caregiving, volunteering). Finding a balance that supports **student voice and choice**, addresses issues of **accessibility and equity**, and manages **instructor workload** is one way to nurture a classroom environment that is supportive, accountable, and inclusive.

Accessibility upgrade

While institutions often discuss student wellness and instructor well-being separately, attending to both in connected ways is crucial for supporting engaging, equitable, and accessible teaching and learning communities. Some considerations that overlap across educators and learners include considering **workload and resource constraints**, prioritizing **work – life balance**, and attending to **unique access needs** across individuals and classroom cohorts. By working together in flexible and relational ways, we can care for each other in ways that support robust and authentic learning.

Strategies: Setting deadlines

Here are five approaches to setting deadlines that you can consider for your teaching context:

- Developing scaffolded alternative and multimodal assessments that reduce or eliminate the need for timed exams or large end-of-term projects (e.g., podcast; digital storytelling project; research project; community partnership)
- Offering students a set number of extension days (usually 4 - 7) that they can use as they wish throughout the semester across assignments; these are sometimes referred to as “grace days” or “flexible extension options”
- Setting a “no questions asked” extension for each assignment individually (e.g., 1 - 3 days; see Soicher, 2022)
- Co-determining deadline dates in consultation with the entire class
- Developing two different deadline pathways that students can choose from at the beginning of the semester (an alternative to this approach is to invite students to sign up and commit to individual deadlines across the entire semester)

Supporting students through office hours

One common deadline practice is including a syllabus statement that invites students to reach out directly to the instructor with requests for deadline extensions. Coupled with a teaching approach

that prioritizes relationship and community building, this is one way to demonstrate your commitment to responsiveness and flexibility.

At the same time, this approach can create barriers for a few reasons:

- **power differentials** (e.g., between instructor and student; between TA and student)
- **hidden curriculum** (e.g., students who have more familiarity about how to reach out to instructors with requests via email or office hours)
- **systemic inequities** (e.g., students with social anxiety may struggle to reach out with a personal request, while other students may easily be comfortable with making such an ask).

Offering multiple types of deadline flexibility and different ways of reaching out to you (e.g., email, in person, synchronous chat) is one way to mitigate the barriers caused by a unidirectional approach to deadlines.

↘ Accessibility upgrade

Some students may be unfamiliar with the concept of **office hours**, especially if they are first-generation post-secondary students or international students who have come to the U of A to study. Some students may even assume that office hours mean times when you are doing individual work and are not available to meet with students. Some options for mitigating this issue include **renaming office hours** (e.g., student meeting times; coffee chats; Q&A sessions), **offering virtual video, audio, or chat-only office hours**, and spending time during class **sharing the purpose of office hours** and welcoming students to meet with you with questions / concerns or to have a general discussion.

Learn more: Additional resources

Internal resources: If you have questions or concerns about accessible approaches to setting deadlines, you can reach out to the following units for consultation and support, depending on your specific needs:

1. **Centre for Teaching and Learning** – discussing the value of flexible approaches to deadlines; integrating flexible deadline policies into your course; scaffolding assignments; inviting students into the co-creation of course deadlines.
2. **Information Services and Technology** – setting time accommodations for quizzes in [eClass](#) or in [Canvas](#).
3. **Accessibility & Accommodations Services** – integrating specific student accommodations into your pre-developed flexible deadline approach; accommodating individual student needs related to deadlines.

External resources:

1. Center for Teaching and Learning. (2022). [Faculty share ideas about late work policies](#). Boise State University.
2. Eera, T.A. (2023). [Spotlight on SOTL: Flexible deadlines – Do they work in teaching?](#) MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching. McMaster University.
3. Fleischman, T. (2024). [Flexible due dates lower student stress without loss of rigor](#). Cornell Chronicle.
4. Open CoLab. [Flexible deadlines](#). Plymouth State University.
5. Soicher, R. (2022). [A “form” of flexibility: An easy way to grant extensions to students](#). Center for Teaching and Learning. Ohio State University.
6. Stearns Center for Teaching and Learning. [Designing for flexibility: Adapting policies on student work](#). George Mason University.