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On Our Best Behavior: Politesse in the Age of Zoom

Emma Jaber and Josh Merchant

Students making the transition to online classes are experiencing a learning curve when it comes to Zoom; the seemingly universal choice for virtual classes, cocktail hours and more. With interchangeable backgrounds, staying awkwardly muted (or being unmuted when they really should be), or just having no picture at all, some struggle to make the shift and are finding the environment a little awkward.

Zoom etiquette is not something anyone was well versed in before the exclusively online setting was a reality, but now students are wondering: How exactly should you act on an electronic platform? We are here to hopefully help you decide just how.

Can I eat breakfast on zoom? My classes are so early!

EJ:

Well, in real life school, I have had many classes with hungry students who bring food in. I say go for it, as long as you stay muted when necessary. This is not your personal ASMR chewing video and you don't know how much the Macbook microphone might pick up.

JM:

Aspirationally, I would love to be one of those people who wakes up early, showers and eats breakfast before a Zoom call. But realistically? It's just not happening. I need to eat, and I need to be in class, so I'm going to eat in class. With that being said, try not to be a slob about it. You may be alone at your table, but your classmates can still see you eat, so don't talk with your mouth full and don't spit food on your camera.

And remember: we can still see you pick that chunk of scrambled egg off of your dirty floor. Please don't eat it—God is watching, and so are your classmates.

Ok, can I make breakfast on Zoom? How about lunch? Is Uber Eats acceptable?

EJ:

I feel like you can eat and be attentive, but cooking a whole MEAL and your attentiveness probably has an inverse correlation. There is some level of respect I feel like Zoom classes require, even if it feels less than in real life, and cooking feels out of bounds. As far as Uber Eats, I feel like a quick pause to run to the door is totally fine. It's probably the same amount of time that an in person bathroom break would take. Eat up!



Faye White

With online instruction on zoom, many college students it's easier to get distracted with other online tabs, homework, or snacking

JM:

On my first day of class, I accidentally prepared my coffee with my microphone unmuted, which led to my professor calling me out in the middle of class—very embarrassing! Lesson learned: mute your mic when cooking. For more complicated meals, such as frying eggs or chopping veggies, I would say that you should mute your camera, as well. With you running around your kitchen, it'll make it tough for your classmates to focus, and your professor might be offended as well.

However, if you're just pouring a bowl of cereal, I say go for it. It takes one minute, and hardly anyone will notice. If you're ordering food, that's totally chill, too—sometimes you just need Pad Kee Mao from Panwa to get through class. We're only human.

What is the best way to use the restroom when I'm in class? What if my professor directly asks me a question while I'm peeing?

EJ:

From what I've seen, people will drop it in the chat that they're going to the bathroom, and if the professor doesn't see it, we'll just mention it as a class and move right along. People seem more stressed than necessary when it comes to Zoom vs. bathroom—just go ahead and drop a note in the chat. All I can say is that I hope it never crossed your mind to bring your Zoom class to the bathroom with you.

JM:

Such a complicated question! Do I leave an empty seat and let my professor think I'm skipping? Do I mute my camera and keep listening to the lecture while I pee? What if I accidentally leave my mic unmuted and the whole class hears? A nightmare! I would say that it depends on the situation, but the best option is to leave an empty seat. As long as you're fast, you shouldn't miss much, and most professors can probably assume that you'll be back in a quick sec.

Are pants required for online class? What basic level of hygiene should I meet? Is bedhead okay?

EJ:

The front camera only goes from about collar bones down, so you're in luck if pants aren't your thing! I don't remember what it feels like to get ready at this point in quarantine and for Zoom, you absolutely don't have to. During my classes I mostly just pin my teacher's face to the main screen, so my appearance; shall we say, is out of sight, out of mind.

JM:

I'll say it. Zoom class is the only social interaction I'm getting at this time, so I'm dressing up. I fix my hair, apply makeup and put on the cutest outfit I can find, since it's the only time another person is going to see me that day. However, that's not true for everyone! If you're wearing pajamas or if your hair's messy, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. We all have different coping mechanisms—some people like to feel like they look good, while others like to feel comfortable and get extra sleep. Professionalism is a hoax, and self-care looks different on everyone.

My family insists on holding a conversation with me when I'm clearly in class! What's my move?

EJ:

Oh girl, close that door. I have to seclude myself and make it very clear I'm in class and that I will be for "x" amount of hours. This way I have my own space, and they know I am not to be disturbed. If personal space is harder to come by in your case right now, I think if your headphones are in and you wave your hands and point at the screen frantically trying to make it obvious you're in class, they seem to get the message.

JM:

First step is to mute your mic and tell them you're in class. If they don't listen, you may have to think differently. Keeping a spray bottle by your computer could be a good idea for some. Any time someone tries talking to you, spray them with water, and they should get the idea. However, this may work better on feline friends—it could incite more harm than good with our family members. It's been so long since I've interacted with another person that I may have forgotten certain elements of human etiquette, so I'd go with whatever Emma says here.

Is there a different etiquette for breakout rooms?

EJ:

Ah breakout rooms, the absolute worst thing in the world. I think if someone takes initiative to break down the awkwardness, they don't have to be all that bad. Remember that your peers are suffering through these online modifications just as much as you are, so if you can muster something friendly to say, go for it. The above rules aren't out the window in breakout rooms, but maybe they are a little more lenient. Treat every breakout room case by case, but just please wear pants and don't bring them to your background.

JM:

Hot take: I love a Zoom breakout room. In my isolated lifestyle in quarantine, I have come to crave the sweet intimacy of a friendly chat in a breakout room, where we can playfully banter for the allotted time. Many norms of etiquette stay the same here—don't pee on cam, keep your cronchy granola to a minimum, and tell your fam to leave you be.

The only difficult piece tends to be when the timer starts to return to the main session. Do we say bye? I vote yes—I personally feel betrayed when my group members don't acknowledge the camaraderie we've built by saying goodbye before clicking "Return to Main Session." But what if your group member won't stop talking as the timer gets closer and closer to zero? Is the whole class waiting for us? In this situation, I would wait for the timer to run out. It's possible that your group member (me) lives alone and simply needs to hear themselves (myself) speak. Let them (me) have this one—they (me) have so little.