

Don't Let COVID-19 Infect Your Academic Achievements

5 Shift-Work Scholar Secrets for the Pandemic

Michael J. Ward, BS, MGA, MIFireE, FACPE

Adjunct Faculty Emergency Health Services, University of Maryland Baltimore County
Adjunct Faculty Institute of Emergency Management, Idaho State University

It was heartbreaking.

Every semester I would watch 12 to 20% new students in my paramedic degree completion program fail to finish their first on-line course. They struggled to keep up in class, eventually dropping or flunking the course or withdraw from the university.

It was not a new experience for me. Creating an on-line fire science program for a large fire department was equally painful, with 16% of the students not finishing their first class.

This is no way to get to your academic goal. **Now we are suddenly thrown into the “deep end” of on-line learning due to the pandemic. What should we do?**

“5 Shift-Work Scholar Secrets for the Pandemic” provides information that will lead to your success in completing college online classes. I obtained my Associate Degree, Bachelor’s Degree and Master’s Degree while working as a career firefighter and paramedic.

When I retired from the job I went full-time as an academic, spending four years as a Fire Science Program head at a large community college and eight years as a Director of an on-line bachelor’s degree completion program at a university medical center.

The five practices in this e-book are distilled from counseling hundreds of working firefighters and paramedics as they worked to achieve their academic goals.

I am reformatting parts of the book to help in our sudden mid-term transition to on-line learning for the Spring 2020 semester.

Mike Ward

mike@goldbadgeenterprises.com

1: Schedule for Success – treat college like your second job

The biggest issue is that students do not plan for the time needed to complete class work every week. Students that are taking their first on-line college class report needing much more time to complete the weekly assignments than in a face-to-face course. In place of the lecture, students have to read and write more each week in an on-line class. Often students are required to post messages and respond to weekly discussion questions that requires a close reading of that week's assignment.

1a) Plan on scheduling 3 to 5 hours every week for each course you are taking

Take your calendar and find 15 to 30 minute blocks of time that you can spend focused on the course activities. You will need a space where you can read, answer discussion questions or write assignments. Coffee shops, bunk room, library and bookstores are four common choices.

1b) Identify due dates and deadlines

Most on-line courses are **asynchronous**, meaning that there is no scheduled weekly face-to-face lecture or discussion. You will be able to access course materials independently, at your convenience. Assignments and exams will follow a general weekly schedule. Interaction with professor and classmates may be largely through discussion boards and social media, but live chats and video conferences may also be used.

Lacking that weekly face-to-face focus, shift-work scholars can quickly fall behind in assignments. The course syllabus provides most of the due dates and deadlines you need to track – they should be on your calendar. If FIR 2117 requires you to post in the weekly discussion board by Thursday, your calendar should show this as a deadline.

Many colleges and universities are striving to have faculty maintain real-time student-faculty interaction through a couple of different programs that are linked to the online learning system. Each of your instructors should provide you with information before the classes resume.

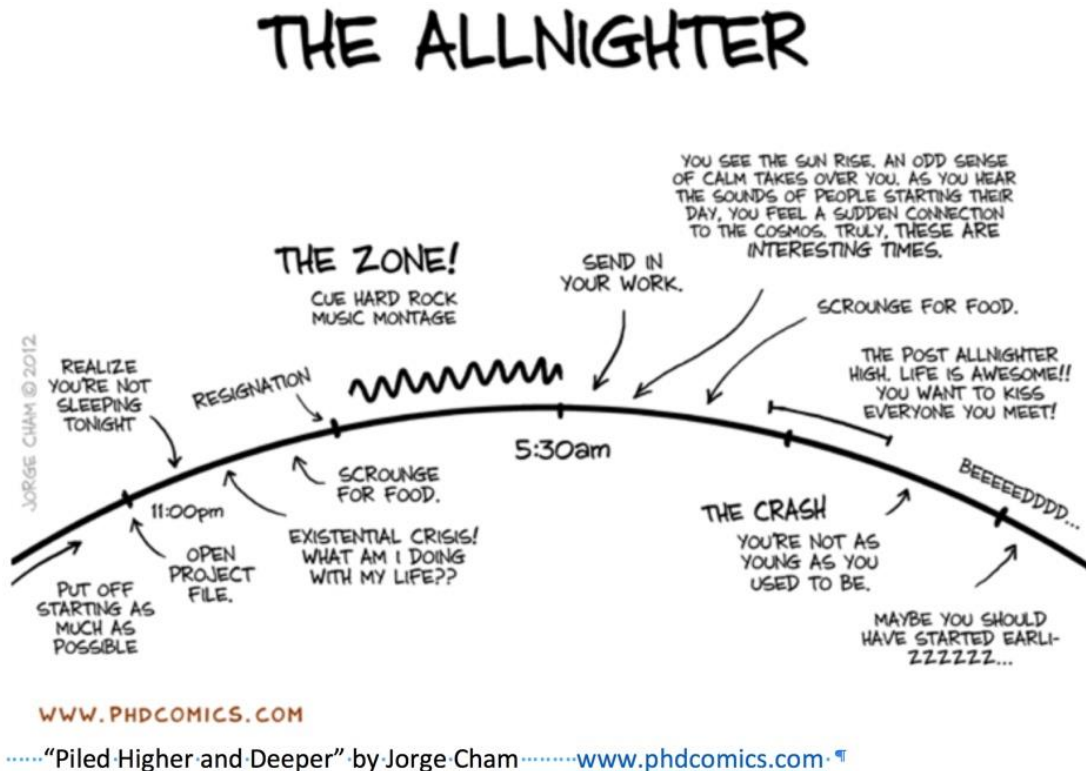
1c) Use intermediate milestones or deadlines to complete a paper or major project

Many classes have a project or paper that is due late in the semester. I learned to provide intermediate deadlines to avoid the shiftwork scholar missing the assignment or doing an all-nighter and delivering an incomplete paper.

Let us look at a research paper due November 14 in a class that ends December 12. Paper requires 2,500 to 3,000 words with 15 references written in APA format. Worth 25% of the final course grade. Here are the intermediate deadlines:

- September 26 – Submit topic for approval
- October 10 – Provide initial references
- October 17 – Provide initial outline
- November 14 – Send paper to professor

You can set similar goals for yourself. Place these deadlines on your calendar to make sure you stay on top of the assignments.



2: Mastering Threaded Discussions

Threaded Discussions are one of the most common teaching techniques within on-line programs. The professor posts a open-ended question on a discussion board and every student responds to the question. In addition, the student responds to other student posts within the thread. It is an on-line form of an in-class discussion.

- How do you know if your responses are great?
- How does the academic institution assure consistent grading?

The University of Maryland Global Campus is the largest academic institution providing on-line programs, with more that 248,000 worldwide course enrollments using thousands of full and part-time faculty members. They struggled with how to evaluate on-line

participation as their legacy distance education programs moved into on-line digital classes. In 1999 MarylandOnline.org was founded to promote and support distance learning.

2a) Student checklist

MarylandOnline provides a comprehensive [online student checklist](#), these 3 items are relevant to threaded discussions:

- Buy all required text and study materials and READ THEM!!
- Be able to communicate through writing as this is the primary vehicle you'll be using to "talk" with your classmates and professors, as well as when you complete assignments to be handed in to your instructor.
- Participate! Think before you contribute your ideas, comments, and perspectives on the subject you are studying and read what your classmates have to say. Be respectful of differing opinions as there is rarely only one way to do anything. Give positive feedback freely and negative feedback with kindness.

2b) Read the discussion question **first**

Most of these courses are set up as modules or weekly assignments. I recommend that shift-work scholars start your activity by reading the threaded discussion questions **first**. As you complete the assigned reading and student activity you can look for elements in this module/week assignment that can be used in answering the threaded discussion question

2c) Respect the Rubric

A rubric is a document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria, or what counts, and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor. There may be different rubrics for each aspect of a response.

Here is an example covering "Participation in the Learning Community" criteria of a threaded discussion:

(Exemplary): Discussion postings actively stimulate and sustain further discussion by building on peers' responses including

- building a focused argument around a specific issue or
- asking a new related question or
- making an oppositional statement supported by personal experience or related research.

3 points

(Proficient) Discussion postings contribute to the class' ongoing conversations as evidenced by

- affirming statements or references to relevant research or,
- asking related questions or,
- making an oppositional statement supported by any personal experience or related research

2 points

(Limited) Discussion postings sometimes contribute to ongoing conversations as evidenced by

- affirming statements or references to relevant research or,
- asking related questions or,
- making an oppositional statement supported by any personal experience or related research.

1 point

(Unsatisfactory) Discussion postings do not contribute to ongoing conversations or respond to peers' postings. There is no evidence of replies to questions.

Zero points

Understanding how your threaded discussions are evaluated is vital in on-line courses because this activity may represent a SIGNIFICANT portion of your course grade.

3: Keep on top of your course score

I am sure that someone in your fire department or EMS agency has an application or spreadsheet to calculate how much take-home cash you will get after working an overtime shift.

College grading criteria varies from straightforward to complex. The college requires that the syllabus include the grading criteria and you (or your overtime calculating buddy) need to be on top of it. Here is an example of a grading criteria from a fire science course in a [FESHE approved curriculum](#)

16 quizzes at 10 points each:	160 points
4 on-line discussion threads	100 points
Mid-Term	200 points
Final	200 points
Total possible points	660 points

At this school:

“A” grade represents 90 – 100% of the course grade (594 – 660 points)

“B” grade represents 80 – 89% of the course grade (528 – 593 points)

“C” grade represents 70 – 79% of the course grade (462 – 527 points)

In another on-line program, the weekly threaded discussion for this course carries more weight:

Course Grade Criteria: Weekly discussion is worth 3 points out of 100 for the course grade.

39% 13 weekly discussions		A- = 90 - 93	A = 94 - 100	
15% Mid-Term		B- = 80 - 83	B = 84 - 86	B+ = 87 - 89
25% Paper/project		C- = 70 - 73	C = 74 - 76	C+ = 77 - 79
20% Final Exam			D = 64 - 66	D+ = 67 - 69
1% Participation			F = below 63	

3a) Maintain an up-to-date record of your course score

Staying on top of your grades lets you calculate the impact if you are considering to not complete an assignment or how much effort you need to put in for the final exam or paper/project.

3b) Ask the instructor for feedback if you get a low score

The role of the faculty member is to guide the student through a learning process. If you got a “1” on a threaded discussion and it is not clear to you why you did not get a “3” ask the professor.

I suggest you approach with a question on how you could have done better on this assignment, not argue that you thought it was a fantastic response deserving a “3.”

BONUS TIP: No Extra Credit

There rarely is “extra-credit” in college level courses. The expectation is that you will do the course assignments and activity. Most of your professors are adjunct (part-time) faculty. They are getting paid about 1/3rd of what a full-time faculty member makes teaching the same course. This is their part-time job and they often do not have the time to create, administer and grade extra credit activities.

4: Write academically

Academic writing – what you do in the threaded discussions and on your paper or project – is different than completing an incident report narrative. There are three concepts with academic writing:

- Done by scholars for other scholars
 - with specific expectations, conventions and requirements.
- Devoted to topics and questions that are of interest to the academic community
 - more than a personal response.

- Presents the reader with an informed argument
 - sort out what you **know** about a subject and what you **think** about that subject.

Two great websites to learn more about Academic Writing are [Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric](#) and the [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#).

4a) Understand the expectations of your paper or project

Your course syllabus or a section within the learning management system will describe the expectations of the paper or project.

Here is an example from a FESHE approved curriculum:

The Final Project will consist of an individual comprehensive report on an incident of your choice, ie: Any large-scale incident that occurred any time during the past few years.

It shall be a typewritten report, using at least a 12pt font, utilizing Times New Roman or Arial. The project shall have a separate title page, a minimum of three to five pages of typewritten material, and a separate bibliography/reference page at the end of the report.

The project will be graded on subject matter, grammar, spelling, and originality. There is absolutely no allowance for plagiarism, or cutting and pasting of Internet material. This shall be a college level report, "typed", if needed, email me and I will explain more.

The instructor provides a pretty thin description of the grading criteria, but this is pretty common.

Another course provided a more detailed expectation:

2,500 to 3,000 words in APA format with 15 references in bibliography

Grading:

7 of the 25 points will be based on your references

5 of the 25 points will look at length and format

5 of the 25 points will look at writing – clear, effective, appropriate?

8 of the 25 points will look at the content of the paper

4b) Know how to use references and information resources

As posted above: “There is absolutely no allowance for plagiarism, or cutting and pasting of Internet material.” Inappropriate use of references and information resources is a significant issue with student papers.

Many academic institutions use programs like [Turnitin](#) to scan student papers to identify cut-and-paste sections of material. The specific formatting requirements in the Final Project indicates that student submissions will be scanned.

Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric has an excellent and comprehensive section on [Sources and Citations at Dartmouth](#). It discusses why learning to cite sources is an essential part of your education, as well as why failing to cite your sources properly can have serious consequences.

The **Purdue Online Writing Lab** has a section on [Research and Citation Resources](#) that shows how to use the four common types of academic writing styles (APA, MLA, Chicago and AMA) to document references.

5: Keep your instructor informed

We are entering uncharted waters with this mid-semester disruption. Everyone at your college or university is scrambling to assure that you have a complete academic experience for Spring 2020. Some of your instructors are going on-line for the first time – a “battlefield” assignment.

Due to the nature of this pandemic, conditions and requirements will continually change.

- Please monitor your school email account.
- Promptly respond to inquiries from your instructor or the university.
- Please keep your instructor informed of changes in your situation that impacts your academic endeavor.