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ADVICE

How to Curate Your Zoom Backdrop, and Why You Should

For faculty members heading back to virtual classrooms this fall, the crisis mode of spring is over and the expectations about online professionalism are rising

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When we teach on videoconferencing platforms, the stuff behind us competes with what we say. Why do so many faculty members ignore that obvious truth? Attentive to our students, and whether their home environments look conducive to learning, we have remained surprisingly oblivious to our own domestic props and to the mixed messages sent by objects visible in our Zoom frames.

Many academics are returning to virtual classrooms this fall, however reluctantly. For months now, we have been working from home — where we neither wanted nor expected visits from our students (and some colleagues). Covid-19 has eroded the boundary between public and private. Yet many of us stubbornly refuse to tweak our personal spaces as the guests that we were forced to invite continue to arrive via technology.

Treating every Zoom meeting like a *Candid Camera* episode is a powerful coping mechanism — and a healthy rejection of the icky thought that online teaching may be our reality for some time to come. Like reluctant visitors who refuse a seat or keep a coat on, we are ever so keen to signal that we're not staying. A glimpse into a professorial lair or into a student's high-school home was endearing last spring, in a time of chaos. Now, visceral authenticity has its costs.

Only last month, I participated in a large universitywide Zoom meeting on how to enhance the online experience for students and optimize the visual layout of our courses on Canvas. Ironically, as more than 100 colleagues met to think hard about which online techniques and graphics worked best, we remained fairly clueless about how we appeared on screen. During the meeting, dozens and dozens of dedicated faculty members aligned on my screen like neat rows of 18th-century portraits, complete with props that volunteered clues about each illustrious sitter. Along with the expected bookcases were piles of unexpected stuff: yoga mats, consumer electronics, dirty dishes on a kitchen counter, inscrutable dark corners, beach toys, crockery, and all matter of clutter.

All the generosity in the world (and there is lots of it at the moment) cannot unsee the stuff in a Zoom frame.

The meeting was important, and I disappointed myself with my superficiality as I became mesmerized by an Armageddon-worthy stash of cat litter behind one colleague, who was sitting at a desk in a darkened room dwarfed by a carpeted feline entertainment station. Sadly, the cats remained out of frame for the duration. I assume that this colleague does not have a campus office filled with feline paraphernalia. So why allow the Zoom shot to present a cartoonish ailurophile instead of a professional scholar? Moving that stuff 10 feet out of frame would have eliminated the distractions. In spite of owning a cat myself, I found it impossible to take seriously any comments coming from that temple to [Bastet](#).

If your computer has the right specs, you can opt for a virtual background. Several colleagues poignantly use photos of their now-vacant classrooms or offices. But not everyone has an up-to-date computer. And hours of flickering like a TV weather announcer in front of a greenscreen projection of the Grand Canyon or of your college campus can prove distracting, too.

While it is hard to accept that home may be our broadcasting reality for the months ahead, dressing the set of our workspace is something that we do as a matter of course in our brick-and-mortar offices — out of mutual professional respect and to retain or gain a smidgen of authority. Sure, some faculty offices are messy, with piles of dusty papers, files, and books. But whereas such academic detritus makes us look even more professorial on campus — as if we are too busy or absent-minded to cull the accumulation of our genius — the same archaeological layers inside our homes just make us look like slobs.

Why should we care what students see in our homes? Don't we have more important priorities now? Doesn't a lived-in home neatly convey our shared humanity and common burdens?

Maybe it served that purpose in the early days of the pandemic. But the crisis mode of spring is over, and the expectations about our online professionalism are rising. Over the long haul, a messy backdrop is just a distraction, and students have enough of those in their lives. When they see us on screen this fall, they need to see someone professorial, someone who has created a space that feels curated and helps students focus on the material.

Certainly not every faculty member has the space for a dedicated office or Zoom nook at home. A few unlucky folks may rely upon a hard-wire connection that glues them to a specific spot. Regardless, there are things you can do to "set the scene." What follows are some tips to start your Zoom-curation process. Keep in mind: This is not about

taking drastic steps or incurring great expense; it's about consciously dressing the set of your virtual classroom's location:

Lighting. Bad lighting and dark rooms are making many colleagues look like hostages in a perpetual interrogation. If turning on ceiling lamps creates glare on reflective surfaces like mirrors or framed posters, then swap them out. Instead, bring in a floor or table lamp to provide softer lighting. Worse still are people so strongly backlit by a window that during certain times of the day they look as if they have a halo around them. Keep your messiah complex private, and adjust your laptop to allow you to face the nearest window.

Neutral versus empty. True, less is more when it comes to videoconferencing. But positioning yourself in front of a completely bare white wall during a Zoom meeting is not the neutral background you seek. Instead, it is the death of your humanity. Avoid looking like a captive in your own basement. Get a plant, splatter some paint on that wall, or maybe tack up just one poster.

Clutter. Conversely, no one trusts a hoarder. Move those piles, and reduce your vast *Star Wars* figurine collection to just a few visible talking points. An overload of knickknacks and other stuff makes you look unprofessional and shouts, "This person is disorganized and lacks an intellectual filter." The solution may be to Marie Kondo the few shelves or surfaces behind you. You can keep everything — just place most of it out of view.

Curb parental pride. Are you protesting too much about what a great parent you are with all those finger paintings and pinch pots behind you? Humanize a clean workspace with a minimal number of personal or aesthetic objects. Living pets and children can move in and out of frame unexpectedly because they are the stuff of life. But if your only viable Zoom classroom is in front of a family picture gallery, rehang it elsewhere for now.

Avoid doors. Sitting in front of an open clothes closet is not a professional look. In fact, if you can, avoid doors and windows in your Zoom background. They tend to beckon the viewer like portals to the beyond in a surrealist composition.

Bookcase credibility. Professors rarely lack that type of cred in their campus offices. But the books you keep at home are likely to be a higgledy-piggledy assortment of kids' board books, guilty-pleasure reads, and airport paperbacks. Do the specific books on the visible shelf behind you truly convey the authority you wish to project in class? Are they related to the subject you teach or administer? Adjust and dust that library. Believe it or not, students will try to read the spines on your bookshelves.

Be modest. Perhaps you have a beautiful house or apartment. Nice to know you're living your best life, but you will want to tone it down. You wouldn't broadcast from inside your Lamborghini, would you? (Actually, maybe you would if you had one, but faculty salaries make that highly unlikely.) Still, why are you making students and colleagues stare at your fancy wine fridge at 9 a.m., or at your majestic marble fireplace in the fall? Be sensitive to differential economics in your classroom and the privileges signaled by that fancy window treatment or a glimpse of your cavernous living room.

Camera angles. Set the camera too high, and you look like [Gulliver in Brobdingnag](#). Too low, and you just gained two chins and a shot at playing a troll in the next Peter Jackson film. You don't need to invest in fancy equipment to fix the problem. Even a stack of books can make a good Zoom platform for your laptop, although you may then have to invest in a separate keyboard or mouse.

Teaching online due to Covid-19 is hard enough, and self-consciousness adds to our burden. Sorry. As a faculty member or an administrator, however, you do not enjoy the option of turning off your camera. Unlike the spring, when you were fumbling as much as your students, your Zoom location can no longer be accidental. With a bit of planning, your choices can look deliberate, reassuring, and academic.

Rather than expect your students to pretend not to see the things that you've allowed in the shot, be proactive and remove anything incompatible with a professorial persona. Save unadulterated honesty for your private relationships.

Don't worry: Dressing the background of your fall Zoom classes does not mean you cannot still wear those pajama pants while you teach, as long as you're filming yourself from the waist up. You will simply be wearing them with increased confidence.

If you have questions or concerns about this article, please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

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