

Withdrawing from a Course: Should I Stay or Should I Go?

If you are thinking about withdrawing from a course, it is important to determine the reasons.

- Are you struggling?
- Are you doing well but not feeling challenged?
- Are you enjoying the content but finding it more difficult than you planned?
- Do you feel like you have too many commitments and need to scale back?
- If this course is required for your major, are you learning well enough to be successful in future courses that build on this one?

Strategic use of a withdrawal can protect—or even improve—your grade point average (GPA), as long as you use the additional time to work on your other courses or attend to your wellbeing. But there are potential downsides to making an uninformed decision. It will help to talk this through with a faculty advisor, or a professional advisor in the Academic Advising Center. This document includes a variety of perspectives you need to consider before withdrawing from a course

Withdrawing from a course is not the same as dropping it.

If you start a course and decide during add/drop week (1st week of the semester or block) not to pursue it, that is considered a “drop” and leaves no record on your transcript.

If you stay in a course past the add/drop period, you can withdraw during weeks 2-5 of a block course or during weeks 2-10 of a semester course. Deadline dates for withdrawal are indicated on the [academic calendar](#) for each semester, which can be found on at Ithaca.edu/registrar. Withdrawal after the deadline will be recorded as an F on your transcript.

You must file a fully completed electronic withdrawal form through [IC Workflow](#) no later than the last day of the withdrawal period. This results in a grade of “W” on your transcript for that course. It means you started but chose not to finish a course. You do not earn the credits, but the W has no numeric value so it doesn’t impact your GPA.

You still have to pay for the course you attempted; doing this too often is expensive and will slow your progress to graduation. And if you plan on going to graduate school at some point, more than a few W’s on your transcript suggests a pattern of starting things you do not finish, which could work against you in grad school applications.

Withdrawing from a course may necessitate making up credits.

Withdrawing from a class and dropping below 12 credit hours does not affect whether or not you are a full-time student. However:

- You should ALWAYS consult with Student Financial Services to determine what—if any—impact withdrawing from a course will have on your financial aid.
- Remember: if you don’t AVERAGE 15 credits a semester, you will need AP, transfer credits, or winter/summer courses to complete your degree program in 4 years.
- If you have taken a W before, are on warning for credit hours, or have not been averaging 15 credits per semester, you should meet with your advisor to consider what a W could do to your academic status.

With these factors in mind, there are some circumstances when it is to your advantage to take a W.

Questions to Ask if You Are Not Doing Well in the Class

How much of my grade is still to be determined at this point in the semester?

Some courses are back-end loaded: the grades at the end of the semester count more than assignments at the beginning, so if you do well in the second half of the semester, you can bring your grade up substantially. Look at your syllabus and calculate:

- What percentage of my grade that is still under my control?
- How many assignments are left to do, and for how much of the final grade do they count?
- Are there any opportunities for extra credit or revision and resubmission of assignments?
- How many weeks do I have to get this work done?
- Can I still pass the course given my number of absences?
- What is a realistic grade I can still earn at this point?

If you cannot figure this out, ask your professor. Even if you are embarrassed by high absences or having done poorly on assignments, a professor would rather talk with you about how to manage your current situation most effectively than to record a final grade of F to someone who didn't ask for clarification of where they stand and any options for recovery. You cannot make this decision without this information.

If this course required for my major or minor?

- No
 - This might be a situation in which withdrawing from one course gives you more time to better work in your other classes. Consider a W.
- Yes
 - Does my department require a minimum grade in all or some courses for the major? If so, will I earn that minimum?
 - Trick question! At first glance you would think "no W: I should stay in the course if I can pass it." But many requirements build on each other. If you earn a minimum passing grade in this course, will you know enough to do well in the courses that follow in the sequence of your major? If not, take a W. Knowledge is power: when you take the course in a subsequent semester you can go in prepared to address the issues you encountered the first time.
 - When will my department offer this course again?
 - If your major is highly structured, withdrawing from a course may cause you to get out of sequence. If the course is only offered every other year, this is a big deal. If the course is offered once a year (say, only in fall) you will need to work with your advisor to determine if it is worth taking a bad grade to stay in sequence.

What grade am I likely to earn if I continue?

- I cannot pass this course and will earn an F
 - You should probably take a W to protect your GPA.
- I can pass this course but only with a grade in the D range.

- What other grades are you expecting? Use a College GPA calculator to see how the D would affect your semester and your overall GPA.
- If the D would bring your semester or cumulative GPA below a 2.0, a W may be a good option.
- I can pass this course with a grade in the C range or better.
 - Unless you are required to earn a specific minimum for courses in your major (e.g., nothing below a B) you should probably stay in the course and access the academic support resources you are already paying for as part of your tuition. Meet with your professor, reach out to the appropriate academic support office (Tutoring, Writing Center), barter something you can do for help with studying for an exam or revising a paper, form a study group.

What if I don't take the W and get a bad grade?

First, rethink what you think of as a bad grade; earning a C in a difficult subject that you tried your hardest to learn should be seen as a growth experience, not a failure.

Second, most courses you are taking for a letter grade can be retaken... but that doesn't always mean they should be. This does not apply to pass/fail courses or any you are using your S/D/F option for. Retaking a course leaves the original course, date and grade on your transcript, but uses the grade from the second, better attempt in calculating your GPA. You pay for the course twice but do so to improve your GPA. Talk to your advisor: this is not a decision to make alone.

Note: some majors limit the number of times you can retake all or certain courses. Check the catalog and speak with your advisor about whether this is a good move for you.

I am doing well enough in this class, but...

I dislike the material or the professor

If you are going well enough to complete this course, this is usually not a good reason to take a W. In your professional and personal lives, you will have to do things you do not love or that do not engage you, and you may have to work with people who think differently or have different values than you. Remember: there is no wasted knowledge and no wasted experience. You have no idea when you are going to "use" something learned in, or from dealing with, this class.

I feel challenged by the ideas, my classmates or the class climate

Grappling with intellectual diversity, learning our own biases, identifying blind spots and gaps in our knowledge are all some of the reasons why people come to college in the first place. It is impossible to grow without challenge. So opening yourself to people who think and believe differently, and to course content that challenges you to really think through your knowledge, practices and beliefs is critical to becoming an educated person.

That said, if contact with the material is triggering, or if participation with the professor or your classmates is negatively impacting your mental health, that is a different matter. If possible, discuss this with your professor. If not, consult your advisor and know that IC has a [bias reporting system](#) that follows a due-process protocol for investigating claims of bias that is affecting your ability to learn.

I'm feeling overwhelmed due to...

- Too many courses or credits
 - take a W and learn from your mistake! Overloading yourself rarely works!
 - decide on a “strategic C”: decide which course you will sacrifice and do less-well in so you can devote your best attention to the courses that are most important to you.
- Competing extra-curricular commitments
 - have a deep think, both alone and with a thought partner who is not invested in the outcome of your decision about your priorities. You are here to learn. And while you definitely learn from extra-curriculars, if they are getting in the way of your academic success, you need to trim your commitment to meet your academic needs, even if only temporarily.
- Balancing school with my job.
 - This is hard, but the bottom line is if you do not pass your classes, you will not need the job because you will not be able to stay in school. Worth considering: compare which is more cost effective.
 - What will it really cost to *retake* this course?
 - Tuition?
 - Lab fees, books and materials?
 - What will it really cost to *pass* this course?
 - Giving up hours at work? (temporarily)
 - Hiring or bartering for a tutor?
 - Getting a small emergency loan from college, family or friend?
- Need to tend to my mental and physical health
 - Nothing is more important than your health. If you cannot attend college full time, or if you need to adjust your graduation calendar to take longer than four years in order to complete the requirements, that is important self-knowledge. Work with your health care provider, family and advisor to determine the best college completion plan for you.
- Family demands
 - If family demands are based on their adjustment to your becoming independent, those are necessary “growing pains” for them.
 - It can be hard for families to respect a student’s need for boundaries, but impossible if you do not assert any limits. Sometimes, we have to say no to helping family now to get the education that will empower us to help them more after graduation.
 - If a family crisis, including health or finances, is interfering with your ability to do well academically, it is important to talk with a counselor about short- and long-term strategies for determining your priorities. [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#) has counselors who can help you with these issues.
- Learning disabilities
 - If you have not registered with Student Accessibility Services, do this immediately. You do not have to use all your accommodations all the time but registering protects your right to use them when you need them. Work with your SAS specialist and advisor to consider whether a W is the best course of action. Some students benefit from adjusting their graduation plan to reduce the number of credits attempted each semester, and

either add semesters to the plan, or add course work in January, May and summer sessions.

I'm behind in my class that I...

...have been attending regularly

- Create a time line for work to determine how to get all/most of it done reasonably well, and ask for help.
- Talk with the professor about your plans, ask for an extension if that will not cause a domino effect, and ask for strategies to study the material more effectively.
- Use a friend, advisor or professor as an accountability partner to break big tasks into smaller pieces, and to check in while meeting intermediate deadlines.

...have not been attending regularly

- Read the attendance policy in the syllabus.
 - If you have far exceeded the limit on permitted absences
 - Contact the professor and ask about the feasibility of creating an academic recovery plan to make up missed work. If the professor says no, based on absences and missing work, take the W.
 - If you are slightly over the limit
 - meet with an advisor in the Academic Support Center to develop an academic recovery plan
 - contact the professor, share your commitment to making up missing work, and ask to meet to share your academic recovery plan for the course

I'm finding the course to be harder than expected

Unless you are required to earn a specific minimum for courses in your major (e.g., nothing below a B) you should probably stay in the course and access the academic support resources you are already paying for as part of your tuition. One of the best ways to approach college is through the concept of productive struggle. Learning is sometimes difficult, both in college and in the professional world. Productive struggle is the belief that we actually gain more from grappling to learn challenging content or skills than we do from absorbing information and performing tasks with little effort.

Access the academic resources you are already paying for as part of your tuition<

- Meet with your professor
- reach out to the appropriate academic support office (Tutoring, Writing Center)
- barter something you can do for help with studying for an exam or revising a paper
- form a study group to teach each other and send questions to the professor, etc.

I'm stressed by multiple coinciding deadlines

- This is usually *not* a good reason to take a W.
- Create a timeline for work to determine how to get all/most of it done reasonably well* and ask for help. *Perfectionism is deadly. "Progress not perfection" is a better motto.

- Approach a professor *in advance* to ask pre-emptively for a small, strategic extension. Two papers due on the same day? Ask to move one, and then surprise yourself and your professor by getting it in before the deadline you decide together.
- Use a friend, advisor or professor as an accountability partner to break big tasks into smaller pieces, and to check in while meeting intermediate deadlines.