

Technology collapses distance and accelerates the demands upon us: of responsiveness, of production, of quantity. Academics are pulled in multiple directions, through a pile-up of small administrative and procedural duties that Cal Newport calls the “overhead tax.”¹ Emails and messages flood in, and we feel like we need to immediately respond. We can’t sustain this culture of overwork. Something needs to change.

Professors usually have at least three missions at a time: research, teaching, and a third that is up to them (typically in industry or a long-term hobby), in addition to a personal life. That’s a lot to juggle. To manage this workload, it is best to set aside long chunks of time for “churn”—administrative, meetings and non-critical tasks—and the remaining time for deep work.² At the same time, it is good practice to communicate one’s boundaries and make expectations explicit.

This document lays out the general expectations and boundaries around communication with myself (Professor Arawjo), such as expected wait times for email responses, meetings, letter of recommendation requests, Slack communication, etc.

Emails

I commit to answering emails **within 2-3 business days** (48-72 hours), and usually check emails in the evening. I do not check emails on weekends, holidays, or during vacations. If you need to reach me urgently, please text.

Meetings

All non-research-critical meetings are scheduled on two preset days of the week (usually, Mondays and Fridays, although this can change), with afternoons for public office hours. If you want to chat, book a time on these afternoons via my **public booking page**. Unless we are working on a major, ongoing research project, grant, or having lunch, all talking meetings should be 25 minutes or less. Meetings longer than 25 minutes are for hands-on work.

Weekends

As a matter of principle, I do not work on Friday nights or Saturdays, ever. There are no exceptions, and I will not be available at these times by any means. In general, I also do not work Sundays; but the choice to work on Sunday is up to my discretion, and usually revolves around class prep or deep work in the afternoon (rather than communication).

Slack or Discord Communication

I generally reply to Slack or Discord messages during business hours (9am-5pm, weekdays). The turnaround time depends on the situation; if it is low-stakes, it is generally within 24 hours. *If you are a student, it is better to communicate via these channels.*

¹ *Slow Productivity* (2024).

² More than just the overhead tax is a problem unique to computing professors: staring at screens all day. It’s hard to relax via screen-based entertainment, when one stares at a screen for their day job. Answering emails or sitting in Zoom calls is just more time spent staring at screens.

Letter of Recommendation Requests

Requests for a letter of recommendation must be made **at least 3 weeks in advance** of the required deadline. I have experienced many students submitting last-minute requests, asking for letters within 24 or 48 hours. I cannot accommodate these requests.

Deadlines

If I am serving as the advisor on a research project, the deadline for academic submissions is **the day before the deadline**. This means that *the paper must be completely submittable if need be, the day before the deadline*. The day of the deadline is reserved for having some tea and reviewing the paper draft for grammar and typos: what editors call a “line edit.” Structural editing, called “developmental editing,” needs to happen at least two weeks before the deadline. *It is the students’ responsibility to meet the day-before-deadline rule.*

Prospective Graduate Student Emails

Please consult my personal website (ianarawjo.com) for the most up-to-date information on whether the Montréal HCI lab is actively recruiting graduate students or postdocs. If we are not actively recruiting, I cannot guarantee an answer to your request. (I receive many emails on this topic a day, and cannot reasonably reply to all of them.)

Why deep work? What are you doing? Isn’t your job meeting with people?

What I am doing: Grant writing, paper writing, advising students, course prep, and especially, design work (ideation) and programming.³

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This document may be updated in the future.

³ A rant about that last point: There is a perception that a professor is not and shouldn’t try to be a programmer. I was once told (by a professor I admire, no less) that one needs to “grow up” and stop coding to be a good professor. There’s a hidden value in that comment: Programming is *beneath* the professor —it is “for kids,” it is infantilized. But when your work is literally building novel systems, well, that seems like a strange comment. It would be like telling a mathematics professor: in order to “grow up” and be a “real adult,” you must stop all this notating on the blackboard. The advice doesn’t *actually* make any sense, and is actually classism in disguise. We don’t ask theory professors to stop all their solitary theory work: instead, we give them visiting professorships so they have even *more* time for deep work. That’s how system builders should be treated, too. It’s the same principle, just that code is our craft tool, rather than math.

I have found that my programming expertise is beneficial to students for a few reasons: it can jump-start projects, it shows students what can be achieved in limited time, it frequently motivates and excites students, and it grounds my advice in real-world experience.