

Guidance for permission to remove masks in instructional settings for pedagogical reasons (updated September 1, 2021)

The [university announcement of August 5, 2021](#) states: “Exceptions to the masking requirement include... **by permission in instructional settings for academic reasons.**” The following provides guidance on this aspect of the announcement.

This guidance is provided against the backdrop of the current COVID situation. Instructors and their departments and programs should weigh the health and safety of both the instructor and the students in the class as well as pedagogical considerations when making decisions about removing masks in the classroom.

Individuals who are not vaccinated or who have not uploaded proof of vaccination should not remove their mask under any circumstances in a classroom, or in any other campus building. Instructors are reminded that they cannot ask students their vaccination status and that Penn Wellness will take into account the individual's vaccination status in the approval process described below.

There are two separate points related to masks in instructional settings to consider: (a) who can be granted permission to remove their masks; and (b) who grants the permission to remove masks. Any request to remove masks in an instructional setting will follow the single process outlined below.

Who can be granted permission to remove masks

Per the [current public health guidelines](#), students are required to wear their masks throughout the entire class period. In the rare case in which seeing the mouth is central to the pedagogical mission of the class, such as in language classes, instructors should consult with their department or program chairs to assess the best delivery method for their class rather than seek approval to remove masks. Given health concerns and from an abundance of caution, students should not remove their masks to ask questions or to contribute to class conversation.

Students who may need special academic accommodations should contact [Student Disabilities Services](#).

In the vast majority of cases, it is likely that the individual seeking approval to remove their mask will be the instructor. This request is most likely to arise in medium or large lecture settings, where the instructor will have to project their voice and where they will more likely be talking for a prolonged and sustained period. Instructors should consider the following before seeking permission to remove their masks for all or part of the lecture period:

- utilizing a microphone. Lapel microphones have been found effective in projecting voices in a full range of pitches even when the speaker wears a mask.
- consider content delivery methods that permit pauses in lecturing to ease difficulties associated with prolonged lecturing.

In cases where these alternatives are not possible, then instructors may seek permission, using the approval process below, to remove their masks for all or part of the lecture period. After the approval is received, instructors are urged to alert their students in advance of removing their mask so that students can choose to avoid the front rows of seats should they wish to social distance. Instructors are also urged to avail themselves regularly of COVID testing opportunities on campus to protect the health of their students. Note that in certain settings such as labs, mask exceptions may not be considered.

Approval Process for Mask Exception Requests

Per the [facial covering requirement policy](#), as of August 5 the University requires that all members of the Penn community wear masks while indoors in public or shared spaces.

Requests for exceptions for an instructor to remove their mask will only be considered under the following circumstances:

- The instructor has determined that it is not possible to use technology such as lapel microphones to address concerns about projecting their voice in large lecture classes.
- The instructor has determined that incorporating content delivery alternatives as suggested above is insufficient.
- The instructor agrees to abide by the mask requirement in all other circumstances and must bring a mask to class even if they have received an exception (to be worn, for example, to and from the classroom, when talking with individual students before and after the class period, in the event in-person instructional technology support is requested, etc.).
- **Instructors who are not vaccinated or who have not uploaded proof of vaccination are not eligible to submit a request.**

All such requests for exceptions must follow the following approval process:

1. Instructors should discuss their request with their Department, Graduate Group, Program Chair or Undergraduate/Graduate Chair. The Chair will evaluate the request on the basis of the points listed above and determine whether the exception is supported by pedagogical reasons. Chairs should consult the undergraduate Deans, Graduate Deans, Professional and Master's Deans, and Graduate Program Directors of their schools regarding those cases supported by pedagogical reasons to determine which cases should be submitted for approval.
2. Chairs will submit those requests to the Office of the Vice Provost for Education at <https://vpe.wufoo.com/forms/request-to-remove-mask-in-instructional-settings/>.
3. The VPE Office will consult with a Wellness officer, who will affirm the decision's consistency with public health guidelines and with the individual's vaccination status, which will be kept confidential. The VPE Office will communicate the final decision to the individual instructor and also notify the Chair.

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