SFU SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

SIAT Survival Guide

A collection of advice and strategies from veteran SIAT students on how to make it through your first year of the program without being ground into paste.

SCHOOL OF INTERACTIVE ARTS + TECHNOLOGY

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INTRO

This SIAT Survival guide is the product of years of practice, hard work, and wisdom gained by senior SIAT students. The ideas in the Survival Guide come from fellow SIAT students who came before you, and are intended to enhance your success as you navigate your way through to completing your SIAT degree. The views contained in this Guide do not necessarily reflect those of the SIAT administration or faculty. If you would like to contribute your thoughts and experience to future SIAT Survival Guides, we'd love to hear from you. You can reach us at siat-survivalguide@sfu.ca.

We wish you all the success you can handle at SIAT and beyond!

University vs High School

Traditional high school methods modified to help ease your first and second year in SIAT.

Staying Quiet

- Speak up in classes, in labs, in team meetings, in brainstorms. Get noticed and become known.
- From this point forward you are building your reputation in the university, and building your reputation for your career. This won't be easy for many of you but it is essential to learn to speak up.

Learn How to Take Notes

- Instructors' do not have a standard way of how they lecture, what kind of visual aids they use, or whether they post their lectures online later. Recording and remembering the information given is entirely up to you.
- Study your professor's teaching methods in the first few weeks of lectures. Then base your note taking method on what you've studied from the professor.

Be Prepared for Challenges

- The expectations in university are high. You may need to spend more time on your studies than you are accustomed to.
- Know that you won't be spoon-fed. Many of your assignments will be open-ended, which will provide the chance to be creative, but can be more challenging.

Instructors Will Not Chase You

- How and when you do your project work is up to you and your team. Life will be easier though if you get it started early.
- Aim to show your TA or instructor your project between the time it is assigned and when it is presented. Seek them out for feedback.
- It's your responsibility to remember deadlines and hand in your work on time. There will be multiple deadlines between your classes, so keep them all on in one central place (i.e. enter them in your calendar as soon as you receive the assignment).

Presentations

- You will be doing a lot of presentations in university, no matter what concentration you have chosen to pursue. This will mean speaking in front of your peers. If you are not comfortable with this then strive to find a way to become comfortable with it (i.e. practice, take a course).

How to Make your Classes Easier

Techniques that will make your year run more smoothly.

Seek Knowledge

+ This can be the background research, critique and second opinion, or this can be advice on technology, programs and skills.

  A few ways to get this knowledge:

  Course Readings.

  Library.

  Talk to your TA's - they are a great source of knowledge and advice.

  Techbytes Open Labs . Visit the website here: http://www.sfu.ca/~tutor/

  Get to know some older students and don't be afraid to ask them any technical or conceptual advice.

  The Learning Commons is a resource available to assist you with trouble areas such as writing. Visit the website here: http://learningcommons.sfu.ca/

Be an active and an assertive learner

+ Be fearless. Don't be shy, or afraid to ask for help from your peers or instructors.
+ If a TA or instructor recommends that you do some extra reading, research or data collecting, make the extra effort and do it.
+ Lectures may appear long so staying focused for the full three hours can be very challenging. Choose 2 or 3 main topics from the lecture and make sure you are well informed about it before the end of lecture.

Compete With your Peers

+ Do it in a healthy way.
+ Some of your peers will be more talented or skilled then you: this will push you harder. By doing so, you will drive each other further than you would have driven yourselves.

Ask Questions

+ Don't be afraid. Not of your professor, not of your TA, and certainly not your peers. Ask them for help when needed.

Resuse Your Knowledge

+ Often times these skills and knowledge won't be explicitly listed as things you are required to know. Even if there isn't an explicit pre-req there may be assumed knowledge.
+ In later courses there are large amounts of knowledge that it will be assumed you know as a result of your having been through 2nd year, or 3rd year. So don't forget skills once a course is done with them, and also be very careful about taking upper division courses before you complete your lower division ones.

Tips to Create Successful Projects

Your concept and idea will be the foundation of everything you do in your attempt to create a solid finished project

Do Background Research

+ Do background research: read course texts and books from the university library; find relevant information on the Internet.
+ A good understanding of the information surrounding the project topic will give you a strong start.
+ Research will help you avoid duplicating an idea that has been done before. It can make you aware of potential ideas that already exist that are flawed and it can provide you with precedents and examples.

Approaching the Project

+ Start with a strong idea.
+ Make use of a wide variety of knowledge from all of your courses as well as outside sources. The ability to apply knowledge to other knowledge will help you succeed.
+ Put your ideas and work out into the open where they can be discussed between you and your teammates.
+ Start earlier than you think you need to. Don't wait until right before the assignment deadline is approaching. When the project is assigned, estimate how many hours you think it will take you to complete and try to have it done early.
+ Keep your teammates updated on your progress.
+ Do what is asked of you first, then get creative.

If the Project isn't Within Your Field of Interest

+ Make sure you set small goals for the project like a "to do list" to keep yourself on track and to get the job done.
+ Motivate yourself with the knowledge that this could be a future portfolio piece.

Processing and Developing Ideas

Idea Number 1

- The first idea you or your team has will rarely be the best idea. It is often the easiest idea and one that a large amount of your colleagues will also come up with. Go Farther!
- Never be satisfied with just one idea. Whether in a team or on your own, have 10 ideas, have 20 if you can. If you have 20 ideas, process through 10 of the most interesting. From that 10 pick the 3 most compelling to carry as far as they can go.

Developing the Ideas

- Examine them from all sides and explore the possible opportunities and issues. This is where your critical thinking skills and knowledge from other sources and courses can really help.
- Know more about your idea than you could ever present but also know how to choose the right information to communicate, and what to leave out.
- Think about your ideas and project constantly.
- Learn how to let an idea brew, roll it around in your mind while you cook, while you are trying to sleep, during your bus ride to school.
- Look for flaws and opportunities, if an even better idea crops up from the foundation of the one you were working on examine it and see if it is viable
- Always run the idea by somebody else

2 things that will quickly make it easier to develop and process ideas with your team are:

1) Finding a brainstorming method that works for your group and being able to expand upon it.

2) Being able to examine each others ideas for flaws and benefits.

Brainstorming

A fundamental process in developing a strong idea.

Brainstorming with your Team

- Find the particular brainstorming styles that work best for you and your teammates.
- Be open-minded and listen to everyone's ideas, thoughts and opinions.
- Get as many ideas out of your head and into discussion as you can.
- Get used to having lots of ideas and examining the benefits and flaws in them both on your own and in a team.

Techniques for Brainstorming:

1) Have one team member recording suggestions and ideas called out by the team so that you can all pick through them and develop the best later help.
2) Have each team member use a white board to develop 2 or 3 ideas alone before opening the boards up to the team for critique and discussion, eventually choosing the 2 or 3 ideas that were the most compelling.
3) Use brainstorming techniques such as post-it-notes, flip chart ideation, or computer programs designed for ideation.

Working with Your Teams

Aim to Work With Different People

- Be careful not to limit yourself by working with the same group in every class.
- It is always good to have a core of people that you know you can work well with but try to make that core asbroad as you can (meet lots of people; figure out who you can work with).
- Work with several people you know then fill the rest of the project team with people you haven't worked with.
- The deeper your field of teammates the more knowledgeable and experienced you all will become.

Avoiding Stress

- Organize the schedule for a project ahead of time, and make sure it works for everyone.
- Double check that everyone knows the meeting time.
- Be aware of your team mates amount of work outside of your project. They may be assigned several other projects at the same time.
- Know your team members, how they handle stress, and how to talk about problems.
- Manage your time: Avoid cramming and working madly at the last minute. Get started earlier, manage your time and do it in small chunks.

Team Roles

- Divide roles within your team so you can be efficient.
- Make sure you try a number of different roles over the course of your degree – be careful not to take the same role in every project (i.e. some roles include project manager, photographer, programmer, idea mapper, documentation person, graphics creator, interface designer, content writer etc).
- If working separately on a project make sure everyone in the group has a very well defined task, vagueness can lead to overlap and time wasted time.

Ways to Be Self Motivated

Play Around with Different Software and Technology

- Check it out before you need it. When projects are assigned that require such skills you will have already gained some familiarity with the technology.
- The course outline may not indicate which software and skills are needed. Ask your instructor or TA for advice on which types of software to learn for the upcoming projects.

Don't be Intimidated By the Skills or Work of Your Peers.

- Learn from them. If you have a tech wizard on your team don't let them do all of that part of the project. Let them lead that part but take that opportunity to learn under your teammate's guidance.
- Don't always do the thing you are best at. Use your teammates as learning tools and try things you aren't as good at while they are there to help teach you.
- Looking at other peoples finished projects doesn't tell you much about the final product. The process, sketches and notes are much more useful when you can find them.

Finding Ways to Make Projects More Appealing to You

- Everything you learn from your program helps you grow, whether it is part of your field or not. So take the opportunity to learn from the project assigned.
- Think about the finished product and all the benefits of creating it.
- Always try to do something with the project that will encourage you to do something "hands on" such as learning practical tools like flash or photoshop.
- Creating your portfolio is a great form of motivation and will encourage you to excel in each project. Complete each project with the intent of including the project in your portfolio. This way, you will have valuable content for your portfolio. Future employers will assess your work ethic, skills, and talent on these projects.

Defining Your Goals

- Think about what you want to get out of your university education – think about your goals and what steps will get you there. Take every opportunity to do things that will support this during your university degree.
- If you aren't sure what you want, this is an opportunity to explore and try different things to see which direction you want to go in. Take diverse courses, become involved with student clubs etc.

Presentation Skills

The ability to showcase your work to your professors,TA's and peers is crucial.

Get Used to Doing Presentations the Right Away

- You will do them frequently throughout your university degree. Most SIAT courses are team based and project based, and you will be required to give presentations on your project.
- Write what you're going to say in advance, and rehearse it on someone.
- Be aware of your body language and voice projection when you are practicing.

Presenting with Your Teams

- Talk about your project with your team, other people in the class, and the teaching team. The more you discuss the idea casually, the easier it will be to present it more formally.
- When presenting in teams, decide if you are all going to talk and if so coordinate in advance who is going to say what.

The Value of a Portfolio

The creation of your portfolio is the stepping stone into your career.

- Portfolio is a necessity in today's design, technology and media fields. Those without one can't compete.
- Build a web portfolio and possibly a physical portfolio before you interview for jobs.
- Keep everything – keep all your projects and convert them to a format that can be used in your portfolio as you go. It's easier to do them one at a time rather than all at once when you go to apply for a job.
- Look at other portfolios for ideas on what should be included and how it should be presented.
- Buy a domain name and web hosting space if possible (i.e. www.yourname.com)
- Customize your resume and coverletter to each job you apply for, and indicate that your portfolio will be available on request. Some companies even require you to submit your web portfolio with your application.

Criticism/Critique

Pay Attention to all Sorts of Critiques

+ Watch the critique of the work your peers do. Learn from their critics as well.
+ They will often make mistakes that were different from your own that you can learn from. They will succeed in ways you never thought of, learn from that too.
+ Expose yourself to as many different ways of solving problems (and critiques) as possible. This is an opportunity to learn.

Learn How to Critique Others Work Constructively
Some steps to this:

+ If you find something isn't working or is wrong, figure out why and make sure that you articulate why in your comment.
+ Try to avoid saying something isn't good simply because you don't like it, especially never shoot down something because you like an idea of your own better. Weigh the project on the merits of the ideas, the logic, the design, the animation, the programming etc.

  The more people participating in the discourse the more rewarding it can become.

Try to Not Feel Defensive

+ Your ideas will not always be right, and even when they are right they will not always be workable.
+ Listen and learn from what others say, find the flaws and move forward.
+ Don't worry; this is part of how you learn.

Seek Critisicm

+ If you have any outside work show it to your TA's or professors for critiques.
+ Check with other students studying in different programs to get their points of view.

Application

+ Apply the information from one critique to later projects. You will rarely get the chance to redo a project that has just been critiqued but the information learned in one critic will apply to many of your other projects.

Useful Tools and Equipment

USB KEYS

+ This device is your friend. Save frequently; make back up copies .

Laptops

+ If you are bringing them to lectures make sure it is on only when you need to.

Gmail Accounts

+ If all team members create an account, everyone can display their schedules including weeks and months agenda. This is useful because you will be able to organize the best time to meet. Documents can be posted here and be updated also.

Webct/Sakai

+ Course delivery websites. Learn how to use them as soon as possible.

Techbytes Open Labs

+ Technical tutorials and mentorship for SIAT students.

Google

+ Search for online software tutorials.

Professors and TA's

+ They are an excellent source of information and advice.

Resources for SIAT Students

ADVISING

Contact the SIAT Undergraduate advisor if you have any questions about which courses to take, or are having trouble registering in a course: siat_advising@sfu.ca.

TECHBYTES

Register in a Techbytes open lab or meet with a Techbytes mentor to improve your technical skills in a given software (http://www.sfu.ca/~tutor/).

COOP

Co-op is a great way for you to get started on the career of your dreams. Co-op jobs are just for students and get you the experience you need to get an awesome job when you graduate. SIAT Co-op is in the advising centre or www.sfu.ca/coop.

JOB BOARD

Use the SIAT job board for supplementing your finances during your studies with relevant work, and to help your transition to the workforce after graduation.