

Saying “Yes” Until I Can’t



Have I taken on too much?

I ask myself this question as I sit and stare at the queue of dozens of ungraded college papers. I am teaching 44 students asynchronously who have weekly work that needs to be graded as well as weekly videos I need to record for their viewing pleasure. Additionally, I teach 37 students live, twice a week, whose first set of seven-page papers recently landed into my university digital account with a loud thump, heard only by me. There are also the seven students I teach in a graduate-level writing class I agreed to take on after a colleague had to leave two weeks into the semester.

What have I done?

I now teach journalism and writing on a part-time basis for two different universities. I adore teaching. I've been doing it for many, many years now and it never gets old. But the way I teach is labor-intensive. Just ask my husband – an engineer by training – who cannot stop himself from trying to concoct ways to lighten my load, to make my class prep and grading more efficient. Silly man. I have always taught and graded in ways that take way more time than most. I can't help myself. I want to provide students with the kind of input I always craved when I was a student and to update course material so it remains relevant to my students, whom I hope to inspire.

When I was diagnosed with MS in 2014, my temporary, full-time, two-year teaching contract at a different school had recently concluded. This was serendipitous because I wasn't sure how I'd fare after a severe MS flare landed me in the hospital and I was starting a course of a

disease modifying medication that had potentially severe side effects (luckily, I wound up adjusting the medicine just fine).

It took me a year, until the fall of 2015, to muster the courage to step in front of a class again. But this time, I was an MS-affected educator who had heat sensitivity, occasional cognition challenges and fatigue. While I was thrilled to be teaching students about the day's news during such an incredibly newsy time, I was secretly worried about how I'd be able to get through the lectures, engage the nearly 50 students and promptly grade their work.

I must have done a decent job because I was later offered two sections of that course per semester. While it was a part-time teaching gig, it felt to me – because of the time-intensive way I teach and grade, in addition to the MS fatigue that slowed me down even further – more like full-time. I felt like the turtle. Slow but steady.

By the fall of 2020, I was asked if I wanted to teach three classes at the university in one semester. When you teach on a part-time basis, you can't really turn down opportunities if you want to keep getting them. I agreed to three courses and, by December, felt like a wrung-out towel, drained physically and emotionally. I dragged myself over the New Year's finish line.

In the spring, I was kind of relieved to be asked to teach only two classes because I needed to regroup, to restore my energy, to sleep, particularly as nocturnal, relentless MS leg cramps were routinely interrupting my slumber, and fatigue was affecting my concentration. Then I received the call about teaching the MFA writing class in a program for which I really wanted to work. I couldn't say no.

Which brings me to this moment. With all these papers – a nonstop tsunami of them – pouring into my digital queue. With the office hours each week. With my lectures/discussions, accompanied by the presentation slides I create for each class meeting. With the awkward weekly videos I record for my asynchronous class. I am crossing my fingers that my MS continues to play nice, because right now, I'm feeling a tad bit overwhelmed.

Have I taken on too much? Maybe, but it's doable because, for now, MS is not making my working life impossible. I may not always be able to say that. So, while I can, I will say, "Yes." Until I can't.