



contact

If you talk to someone who studied abroad thirty years ago, you'll probably hear tales of the weeks he spent on a ship carrying him and his steamer trunks to a faraway locale where nothing besides the occasional letter would interrupt his isolation from the life he'd known before. Today, study abroad is as much an experience of personal transformation as ever, but it definitely involves less detachment from other people and places. First, transportation advances made distances much, much smaller. Then, communication tools such as mobile phones and the Internet built us a borderless world of instant, constant contact.

Now, you can be physically here, but virtually anywhere. When you go abroad, where "here" is changes and a change of routine is probably in order. Though you'll stay in contact with family and friends, time you spend plugged into your home life is time you won't have to build a new one abroad. Dedicate yourself to connecting with a new network of friends and acquaintances overseas who understand intimately the surroundings that are shaping your time abroad—and that will continue to shape your future.

<< contact, connect, communicate

stay connected, be open-minded

- share your stories with those at home to put new experiences in perspective
- keep contact with home in check; find time for new friends abroad
- respect the communication conventions of your host culture
- seek help locally if you need it
- make a record of your thoughts and feelings to help you reflect

communicating while abroad in a connected world



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communicating with those at home

Immersing yourself in your new host culture will be your primary goal, but your experience abroad won't take place in complete isolation from parents, teachers, and friends at home. Keeping in touch can give you perspective on both your host culture and your life back home while easing the minds of your loved ones while you're away. Just be sure to recognize how constant communication will affect your study abroad experience.

How much is too much communication? That depends on your perspective—and on who you're talking to. Maybe when you're on your home campus, you're in touch daily with your family, and even more frequently with friends. Realize, though, that time you spend elsewhere virtually (via telephone, e-mail, or social networking) is time you can't spend interacting with the people and place where you're studying. While abroad, adjust your communication habits and adapt to being unplugged a little more often.

set expectations

You'll need to reconcile how you plan to stay connected (and how often your friends and family at home expect to hear from you) with the communication tools abroad. Things you take for granted at home like unrestricted, affordable Internet access, telephones in your residence hall, and inexpensive international calling may be hard to come by. Determine the best ways to communicate with those at home as part of your pre-departure preparation. Ask your study abroad advisor or program representative questions like these:

- What kind of access will I have to landline and mobile phones?
- Will my current mobile phone work? Do I need to purchase a SIM card from my host country?
- What type of Internet access will I have? Will I have access on campus? What about in my dormitory, residence hall, or homestay?

Once you understand the communication tools that are available, explain to your friends and especially your family how often you'll be in touch. Some students find that talking to people back home less frequently helps them immerse more completely into local life; others find that talking to their parents once a week promotes a realistic understand-

ing of their experience abroad. If you have readily available Internet access, Internet phone calls and instant messaging are great ways to be in touch when international calls are too expensive. E-mail can help you get around the obstacle of large time zone differences—and has the added benefit of being reflective and thoughtful if you take a little time to write it.

put things in perspective

As you immerse yourself abroad, you'll begin to develop a sense of your new surroundings. When you contact those at home, though, remember that they haven't seen what you're seeing or experienced what you're experiencing. Your everyday environment may be beyond the realm of their imagination if you don't put the stories you tell in context both from a geographical and a cultural perspective. That lack of context, plus the anxiety and emotion that comes with having a loved one far away, make it easy for misperceptions to occur. For example, if you say you're not feeling well, parents might get the impression that you need immediate medical attention (and may not have access to quality health care). If you say you're having a bad day, they may get the idea that you're depressed (and perhaps that your resident director should watch you more closely). Be truthful, but be sensitive to what you are saying and how it might be interpreted.

a little isolation helps you grow

When times are tough, your instinct may be to call home to hear a familiar voice. Speaking to someone who knows and understands you will give you comfort in unfamiliar circumstances, but the resilience you build by coping with challenges on your own is one of the greatest benefits of study abroad. When homesickness or frustration strikes, try engaging in even more local activities and seeking out even more locals for conversation or support. Reaching out to parents and friends who are far away may not only make them worry, but will distract you from the local life you could be enjoying. The more issues you resolve on your own, the more independent and adaptable you'll become.

communicating with locals abroad

get in touch with the culture

It's easy to get the idea that the web of worldwide communications has somehow resulted in some standard way that humans communicate worldwide. Of course, that isn't the case. Remember how large a role culture plays in how communications are typically delivered, received, and handled. While an informal e-mail writing style may be acceptable to professors on your home campus, opening an e-mail to a professor in your host country with "Hey, Prof, how's it going?" may not be as well received. In fact, e-mailing professors may not be appropriate at all. In some countries, you may need to speak with them in person before or after class or during their office hours, which may not be followed as strictly as they are in the U.S. When you speak with a professor almost anywhere abroad, you should be more formal than you are used to; don't slip into the informal like you might with friends.

Similarly, in some countries and cultures, a telephone call of any kind is meant to be private, so mobile calls are taken only in a quiet room or outside. Follow the advice of your resident director and the cues of your host culture. Learning how to communicate according to local customs is part of learning how people do things in your new home—and how to make positive, lasting personal connections.

seek help locally

Communication devices—especially mobile phones—make staying healthy and safe easier. You can connect to those at home as easily as to those next door, but your needs in both emergency and non-emergency situations are usually best met by local support services. It's easy to pick up the phone and tell your parents you've just injured your knee in a soccer match, but there's not much they can do to get you help. When you arrive overseas, learn how best to communicate with your resident director and other local resources in times of need. Informing your family is always a good idea, but take care of your immediate needs first.

communicating as part of learning

Intercultural communication is at the heart of study abroad and international exchange. Personal contact between you and those in both your old and new homes is a big part of that exchange. There's probably such a thing as staying too closely in touch, though.

a little less old, a little more new

If you've made a commitment to speak only in your host country language while abroad, you'll undermine that if you're doing a lot of texting, e-mailing, and talking with friends at home in English. Take the time to converse with locals in person and over the phone. Include your new local friends in your online life—through e-mail, social networking, blogging, etc.—and use the local language as much as you can. Share music and videos that you like and ask your new friends to share their favorite books, bands, and websites.

storytelling to reflect and enrich

The more you reflect on it, the clearer you'll see how your experience abroad will impact your life, now and in the future. Writing or telling stories to friends at home and abroad is one of the best ways to organize those reflections. Chronicle your thoughts, experiences, and opinions by writing, taking photos, making videos, or recording podcasts. You'll be able to remember what you experienced and contemplate what you were feeling long after you've returned home, and you can share those thoughts with friends and strangers worldwide through blogs, social networking, and video sharing sites. A few photos of you, your residence, your homestay family, or your neighborhood can go a long way toward easing concerned parents.

The potential goes way beyond that, though. By bringing the reality of daily lives half a world away to others back home, you'll increase their understanding of the world as it really is—making you an agent of change as well as a study abroad alumnus. The record you're creating isn't private or temporary, though, so think about what you're saying and showing and who might read or see it. You're sharing a piece of yourself with the world—a world that includes your family, friends, host family, and professors, not to mention your home university and future employers. Be as culturally sensitive in your blog as you would be face-to-face. You'll build relationships between people who otherwise would never have met, and you'll be amazed by what you've learned.