



Gap year: Planning for time off

Elka Torpey | July 2020

Note: This article is an update of one originally published in [2009](#).

Not sure what to do about a disruption to your original plan? Consider a gap year.

People take time off from school or other endeavors for different reasons—and at different points in their lives. This transitional period is often called a “gap year.” A gap year allows people to step off the usual educational or career path and reassess their future. And according to people who’ve taken a gap year, the time away can be well worth it.

This article can help you decide whether to take a gap year and how to make the most of your time off. It describes what a gap year is, including its pros and cons, and offers tips for planning a successful year off.

To gap—or not to gap?

“Gap year” often refers to postponing continued study after high school. It can also be a break during or after college or graduate school—or at almost any other time.

Although termed a gap year, the time period can be longer or shorter than 12 months. The concept of a gap year is flexible in other ways, too. “Gap year is a state of mind,” says career counselor Marianne Green. “It’s a way of choosing an activity and using that experience in a way that is helpful for the future.” Just about anything, from working on a dude ranch to working in a local store, can be turned into an interesting gap-year experience, says Green: “What’s important is the attitude that you have.”

Some gap years are unforeseen. A student graduating from college might, for example, have difficulty getting a full-time position in his or her field of study. Or family obligations might prevent someone from attending college. Other gap years are more deliberately chosen.



Regardless of the circumstances leading to it, says Green, it’s a good idea to approach your gap year as an intentional undertaking. “The bottom line is that maybe you didn’t get into law school or maybe the job in an accounting firm fell through,” she says. “But you can consciously choose to make your time off the very best experience you can.”

Pros and cons of a gap

A gap year can be a rewarding experience; however, it is not without potential drawbacks. Learning about the pros and cons can help in the decision-making process.

Discussing the possibility of a gap year with school counselors, family, and friends is helpful when considering the implications of taking time off. But in the end, the decisions about how to time an education or career belong to the person taking—or not taking—a year off.

Pros. There are many benefits to taking time off. A gap year can provide experiences that help people gain insight about themselves and their goals. It can give students a break from the pressures associated with academics, resulting in renewed enthusiasm for their studies when they return to school. And it can offer young people real-world understanding of their classroom-based learning.

For some students, a gap year helps to prepare them for future studies. Taking time off before going to school may also provide a chance to earn money for tuition and other expenses or help people decide what they want to do.

Cons. Gap years also have drawbacks. Postponing school or work takes people off of a more traditional path, and it's sometimes challenging to get back on. If not well organized, a gap year might seem too unstructured, and people can become frustrated if they feel that they aren't putting their time to good use.

Once students get out of the routine of academics, it might be difficult to readjust to being in school after having taken time off. And some students who postpone or leave college end up not earning a degree.

Also, you might not be in the same place as your peers when competing for future educational or career opportunities. Gap-year participants should be prepared to answer questions from school representatives and prospective employers about what they did during their gap year and how their experiences influenced them.



Taking a gap year isn't for everyone. For example, students shouldn't pursue a gap year simply to procrastinate applying to schools or because someone else thinks it's a good idea. A year is a long time, so carefully choosing activities is essential.

Planning a gap year

Experts say that the most important part of a successful gap year is to have a plan. The more people look into their options and understand the consequences—good and bad—of taking a gap year, the happier they are with the outcome.

“Preparation is critical to having a good gap year,” says Green. Before deciding to take time off, it's helpful to think about what to do prior to leaving school, expenses associated with a gap year, and activities and goals for the time off.

Tasks before leaving school. Potential gap-year participants who plan to continue their education should do several things to ease their post-gap return.

Students who have been admitted to college may defer admission. If they have been awarded scholarships, they may be allowed to retain them after a gap. Each school sets its own deferral policies; students should familiarize themselves with the rules at the ones that interest them.

Students are also advised to get references before leaving school. Gap-year participants may have less access to high school or college guidance offices that help with school applications, career or educational counseling, and job placements, so consider accessing these resources before taking time off, if possible.

Expenses. It is also important to look into the costs associated with time off. Working full or part time is one way to earn money for gap-year activities, and some jobs provide insurance and other benefits. Service programs might offer a stipend and pay for housing, education, and other costs, but participants often must learn to get by with less than what they are accustomed to.

Some businesses and consultants specialize in arranging gap years. But many of these programs require payment to cover participants' expenses—which may include transportation, lodging, and food—that add to the cost of taking time off.

Activities and goals. Although some people might view the gap year as an escape from a structured environment, the better organized a gap year is, the better the experience promises to be. Start getting organized by determining the types of activities to be pursued and the overall goals for the time off.

For example, a recent college graduate might work with a volunteer teaching organization to test his skills, and consider his potential, as a teacher. Or a high school graduate might work in a restaurant, taking a break from her schooling to get hands-on experience useful for deciding whether to study hospitality management in college.

People often do more than one activity during their gap year; for example, they might participate in a service program while taking an online class in an area of interest. Some gap-year participants do different activities during the fall and spring, breaking up their time like a college semester, sometimes with another activity during the summer and winter breaks.



Popular options for gap-year activities include volunteering, public service work, and full- or part-time jobs or internships. Service organizations, such as [AmeriCorps](#), may be a good source to begin research. Almost anything can make a gap year rewarding, say experts, so long as the time is well planned.

More information

Students should talk to their school's career guidance counselor to find out more about gap years and possible gap-year activities. Public libraries have books about internships, careers, and other subjects that might be helpful to people considering what to do during their time off. And [CareerOneStop](#) and local [American Job Centers](#) have information on short-term job, service, and internship opportunities.

Career seekers sometimes take a gap year to help them determine the type of work they're interested in doing. You can explore career options without taking a gap year—or even if you decide to take time off—by using the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) and reading other content in [Career Outlook](#). The Handbook provides descriptions of more than 300 occupations, along with detailed information about working conditions, pay, and job outlook. Career Outlook explores work and careers through a variety of topics.

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