# Seven Rules for Working From a Coffee Shop

As a college student, I spent a large portion of my days sitting at a coffee shop. When not in class or sleeping, I was most likely found either helming the espresso machine at the student union or haunting the counter, sipping my free 20-ounce shift coffee and waiting for my coworkers to hand off a latte mistake. Caffeine was currency, and the cafe was a convenient student job as much as it was a workspace for completing class assignments: Sometimes the library just isn’t the right atmosphere for writing a paper or highlighting anthropology reading.

These days, not much has changed. I’m still hopelessly committed to drinking multiple cups of coffee per day while writing, except now I do so while typing on a laptop from my desk… or couch or bed. (Don’t judge.) Like many remote workers, I clock in by logging onto the internet each morning. And sometimes, in order to get some real, focused work done without a purring cat laying across your keyboard, it’s necessary to break the routine, get out of the house, and work from a coffee shop.

It’s obvious why coffee shops are the gold standard for telecommuters without a membership to WeWork. Coffee shops always have plenty of caffeine in supply, they often have internet, and they’re generally pretty quiet — but not so silent as to be distracting. They’re also great for short meetings with clients and contacts. However, working from a coffee shop is not as straightforward as it seems. Disrespect for the space has resulted in some businesses deterring so-called “[laptop squatters](https://www.eater.com/tags/laptop-squatters)” by [covering up electrical outlets and changing WiFi passwords](https://www.eater.com/2012/3/6/6607931/coffee-shops-wage-all-out-war-on-laptop-squatters) on a daily basis to prevent internet freeloading. In some cases, computer use was [all-out banned](https://www.eater.com/2014/4/10/6243349/vermont-coffee-shop-bans-all-laptops-and-tablets).

Nevertheless, there is a way for laptop users and coffee shops to live in harmony. From where to sit to the appropriate amount of time to stay, here’s a primer on how to work from a coffee shop without pissing everyone off.

### 1) Pick the right location

Not all cafes are conducive to a good work environment. Regardless of whether you’re planning to work online or offline, find a cafe that has lots of seating. Ideally that seating is also comfortable and in an area with a moderate noise level. Pick too small of a shop, and it becomes much harder to justify occupying a seat for a longer period of time. It’s also wise to find a shop that not only offers drinks, but also serves a decent food selection to balance out the caffeine.

People working online should also take note of coffee shops that have adequate access to outlets and a strong and reliable internet connection: There’s nothing more annoying than buying a drink “for here,” settling in to do some work, and discovering that the internet has gone out.

### 2) Come prepared (but not too prepared)

Every so often a photo will surface online of a person lugging a full [desktop computer monitor](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/01/imacs-in-inappropriate-places-starbucks-edition/251738/" \l "slide8) and [a tower](https://community.spiceworks.com/topic/1926590-10-times-people-brought-desktop-pcs-to-coffee-shops)into a coffee shop, and it’s hard to believe this isn’t some sort of performance art. ([Though sometimes it is](https://improveverywhere.com/2008/02/25/mobile-desktop/).) However, it’s a good example of what not to do as a remote worker. Remember, you’re not moving in.

When working in a public setting, you should travel light: Laptop, plugs, a purse or wallet, and any paper or pens you might need. I’d also add to the list a phone cord in the event that the internet is disrupted and you need to temporarily tether to your smartphone. Bring headphones, too, and wear them if you’re planning to listen to music or work on anything with sound. Also, keep your belongings close and don’t spread out over multiple tables — especially if the cafe is busy.

### 3) Abide by house rules

Whenever we go to someone’s house, we have to adjust to fit that setting. The same goes for coffee shops. They’re places of business with their own rules, and you should abide by them. Some shops, for example, have specific seating areas dedicated to people working on laptops, so that other customers who are just there to relax or have coffee with a friend can have their own space. Some shops limit their hours to people on laptops, who tend to hog tables. Remember to respect and follow those systems. Don’t put a coffee shop employee in the awkward position of having to enforce a rule.

## Other rules broadly apply. If a cafe expects patrons to bus their own tables, bus the table. It also goes without saying, but wear headphones and don’t watch anything you wouldn’t watch with your mother in the room. To do otherwise could be weird and disrespectful to everyone else in the establishment.

### 4) Buy something and reorder often

When you take up space for an extended period of time while using the cafe’s internet, draining the electricity from their outlets, and using the bathroom, you should be paying for that service. At minimum, when working for an hour and a half, it’s appropriate to spend at least $5 at the business with [a tip for employees](https://www.eater.com/2018/11/28/18112819/tipping-in-america-guide-restaurants-how-much). If you plan to stay longer, make sure that you always have something to eat or drink at your table. Try to make a purchase every hour to hour and a half.

There are some exceptions to this rule, of course: At big chain cafes such as Starbucks, there [are policies](https://www.eater.com/2018/5/21/17375806/starbucks-no-purchase-policy-third-place-bathrooms) that allow people to use those spaces for without buying anything, and to occupy them for as long as they want. In these situations, use your best judgement.

### 5) Don’t expect someone to watch your stuff

There will inevitably be a moment while working at a cafe, possibly after three strong cups of cold brew, when you’ll need to leave your table for a bathroom break. Because remote work often includes using expensive laptops or other computer equipment, there’s usually a wariness that comes with leaving your stuff unaccompanied. It might feel even more daunting if you’ve commandeered that oh-so-conveniently located table near that really good outlet by the window that you love. It’s totally reasonable to feel that way.

When this happens, you have two choices: A) pack up your stuff and awkwardly cart it to the bathroom or B) turn to a neighbor who we’ve never met until now and ask them to watch your stuff. Both are fine choices, but if you do choose option B, remember that you’re asking a lot of a person you’ve never met. They might have to leave soon and are too nice to say no. If you’re planning to take an extended trip to the restroom, surrender your table and pack your bag, rather than put a stranger in an uncomfortable position. Depending on how long you’ve been there, you might even take it as a natural breaking point for moving on to a new location.

### 6) Don’t take a call in the coffee shop

Unless you expect the call to last under a minute, please for the love of god do not take a phone call in a coffee shop. People may use cafes as workspaces, but it’s not an office and you’re not in a cubicle. If the call is going to take a while, consider: A) answering and asking if you can call the person back B) Taking the call outside but standing in view of your personal items or C) Packing up your things and moving on. This applies to non-business calls, too.

### 7) Don’t overstay your welcome

Just like at a popular restaurant or bar, coffee shops rely on open tables to serve more customers. If a person walks in and sees that there are no open tables, they might take their business somewhere else. That’s perhaps why so many cafes have adopted an adversarial relationship towards people on laptops. For that reason, it’s important to take an inventory of your surroundings and not overstay your welcome.

If you walk into a cafe and there are barely any open tables, it’s probably not a good place to work for an extended period of time. If your preferred shop starts filling up with too many people as the day goes on, take that as your cue to leave and free up the space for new customers to enjoy. Arguably, the maximum amount of time you should be occupying a coffee shop, even if you’re following all of the above rules, is four hours. Any longer, and you should probably start pitching in for rent.