

A college workout routine: three days around your classes

Your week is a class schedule, and it changes every term. Here's a three-day routine for a campus gym or a dorm room, a two-day version for exam weeks, and the semester from the first week to the break.

Short answer: Lift three days a week, with a day between sessions, around your class schedule: six full-body movements, two to three sets of eight to twelve reps, stopping each set with two or three reps left. In exam weeks, drop to two shorter sessions and hold your weights. Add a little whenever the top of the rep range feels easy.

By Diogo · Updated October 24, 2026 · 8 min read

A class schedule has one big advantage over most weeks: it's set before the term starts, so you know exactly where the free hours are. It also has two problems. It changes every term, and exam weeks can swallow it whole. A routine for college has to survive both.

This one is built for that: three full-body sessions around your classes, a two-day version for exam weeks, and a plan that runs from the first week of classes to the break, in a campus gym or a dorm room. I'm a Health Science student at St. Thomas University, so a class schedule is the week I plan my own training around too. Never lifted at all? [The first four weeks](#) covers the basics, and this page takes it from there. On a college team? Your team's strength program comes first; this page is for everyone else.

Fit three sessions around your classes

Start with the schedule, not the program. Put this term's classes in your calendar, then look for three windows of about an hour (forty-five minutes of training plus getting there and changing) with at least a day between them.

- **Classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday?** Train Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, or use the longest gap on your class days.
- **Classes mostly on Tuesday and Thursday?** Monday, Wednesday and Friday are yours.
- **Tie each session to something fixed.** "Straight after my ten o'clock class" is easier to keep than "sometime Tuesday". ([Morning or evening? Here's how to choose.](#))
- **Put the sessions in the calendar like classes.** They're part of the week, not what happens if the week goes well.

Which days you pick matters less than you'd think. A meta-analysis of 25 studies found that when the total amount of training was matched, how many days it was spread over made no meaningful difference to muscle growth, and concluded that people can choose how often to train a muscle "based on personal preference".¹ The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand goes further: its authors propose that tailoring a program so people actually take part matters more than conforming to the

specific prescription rules of earlier position stands.² Three days is the plan here because it leaves a day off between sessions and an obvious version to drop to when exams hit. [How often to train](#) covers the other options.

The routine: two full-body days, alternating

Two sessions, A and B, alternated: A, B, A one week and B, A, B the next. Each has six slots in the same order (a squat, [a hinge](#), a push, a pull, one extra and a core move), so every session trains the whole body. The campus gym version of each exercise comes first; the dorm version follows it.

Day A

1. **Squat:** leg press or goblet squat. Dorm: a slow bodyweight squat, or a goblet squat hugging a loaded backpack.
2. **Hinge:** Romanian deadlift with dumbbells. Dorm: single-leg hip bridge.
3. **Push:** dumbbell bench press or a chest-press machine. Dorm: push-up, with your hands on the bed frame if the floor version is too hard.
4. **Pull:** lat pulldown. Dorm: band row, with the band anchored in the door.
5. **Single leg:** walking lunge or step-up. Dorm: reverse lunge.
6. **Core:** plank, as long as the position stays good.

Day B

1. **Squat:** goblet squat or a [hack squat machine](#). Dorm: split squat.
2. **Hinge:** [hip thrust](#) or back extension. Dorm: single-leg Romanian deadlift holding the backpack.
3. **Push:** overhead dumbbell press or incline press. Dorm: pike push-up, hips high.
4. **Pull:** seated cable row or one-arm dumbbell row. Dorm: one-arm backpack row, free hand on the bed.
5. **One you like:** curls, lateral raises, [a chest fly](#) or triceps pushdowns. Dorm: band curls or band pull-aparts.
6. **Core:** dead bug, slow. (For swaps, see [the core workout](#).)

Sets and reps: two sets of eight to twelve reps for the first two weeks, three sets from week three. In the dorm version, where the loads are lighter, work in twelve to twenty. Every set stops with two or three reps still in you, three or four in the first two weeks. ([Here's how to judge reps left](#).) Rest about ninety seconds between sets. ([How long to rest between sets](#).) A session runs forty to fifty minutes.

Campus gym or dorm room

If your school has a gym you can use, it's the version that goes further, because there's always a heavier weight. The dorm version isn't a lesser program, though. The same ACSM position stand lists elastic-band and home-based resistance training among the kinds that improve strength, and its review found muscle growth didn't depend on whether the loads were light or very heavy.² What a dorm needs is other ways to make a set harder once the reps come easily. In order:

1. **Add reps.** In an eight-week study of experienced lifters, adding reps at the same weight built leg muscle and strength about as well as adding weight did.³ Work each exercise up to twenty.

2. **Slow the lowering** to three or four seconds a rep.
3. **Go single-leg or single-arm** wherever the exercise allows it.
4. **Add load:** a heavier backpack, a stronger band, or one pair of adjustable dumbbells ([the three-day dumbbell plan](#) is written for exactly that).

Mixing the two is fine: the gym most weeks, the dorm version when the walk to the gym is the thing you'd skip. If walking into the gym is the hard part, [your first day, step by step](#) is the page for that.

The exam-week version

Two sessions in the week, about thirty minutes each, at least a day apart. Four slots: squat, push, hinge, pull. Two sets each, last week's weights, two or three reps left. No new exercises and no testing yourself. If the week can only hold one session, do one.

That's enough to hold on to what you've built. In one trial, adults aged 20 to 35 who had lifted three days a week for sixteen weeks kept the muscle they had gained over the next 32 weeks while training at a third of that dose, or even a ninth.⁴ And two days a week is still the World Health Organization's floor for adults: muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days a week.⁵

The semester, block by block

Weeks 1 and 2: learn the movements

Two sets, light weights, three or four reps left on every set. Write down the weight and reps of every set in your phone. You'll probably be sore after the first sessions: soreness is common when a kind of activity is new to you, and one review of the research advises easing into new exercise over a week or two.⁶ That's why the start is easy on purpose.

Weeks 3 to 6: build

Three sets of everything. Whenever you reach the top of the rep range with reps to spare, add the smallest step next session: one notch of weight, or one rep. Three sets of each slot, three days a week, is nine hard sets a week for each of the squat, hinge, push and pull, close to the ten or more sets per muscle group a week that the ACSM review ties to more muscle growth.² ([Progressive overload, explained.](#))

Midterms: drop, don't stop

Switch to the exam-week version for as long as midterms last. Then go back to three days at the weights you left off at, not back to week one.

The second half: keep adding

Same rule as before: a notch or a rep whenever the top of the range feels easy. If an exercise has gone stale after eight weeks, swap it for another in the same slot. Keep the slots. ([Leg day, the hamstring workout](#) and [the back workout](#) list swaps for the leg, hinge and pull slots.)

Finals: hold the line

The exam-week version again, or one session a week if that's honestly all there is. The goal for finals is to keep what you built, not to add to it.

The break

Time off between terms is not a reset. Over 24 weeks in one study, young men who bench-pressed either straight through or in six-week blocks with three weeks off between them ended with similar gains in muscle size and strength.⁷ Take the break if you want it. If you'd rather keep going, the dorm version works in any room. Off for much longer than a break? [Getting back into training](#) is the restart plan.

Sleep is part of the routine

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society recommend that adults sleep seven or more hours a night on a regular basis, and say that more than nine may be appropriate for young adults.⁸ So think of a late night before a morning session as a scheduling problem, not a test of willpower: move the session, or do it at the same weights with one set fewer. A short night is never the day to go for a personal record.

The rest of the week counts too. The WHO guideline behind the two-day minimum also asks adults for 150 to 300 minutes of [moderate aerobic activity](#) a week, or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous activity.⁵ Lifting is the strength half of that guideline, not all of it.

Five rules for a whole semester

- **The calendar decides, not your mood.** Sessions go in like classes, at the start of the term.
- **Exam weeks drop to two days, or one. They don't drop to zero.**
- **Never miss twice.** One missed session is a busy week. Two in a row is the start of quitting.
- **The logbook comes with you,** from the campus gym to the dorm to the break.
- **If it hurts, stop and ask.** Sharp pain is not soreness. If you have an injury, a medical condition or a medical question, talk to a doctor before you start; your school's health center is a good first stop if it has one. I'm a fitness coach, not a doctor.

If you'd rather not plan it alone

A routine on a web page can't see your schedule. Coaching is the version where your workouts live in the Trainerize app, built around the days you actually have, and a weekly call looks at the week you just had and rebuilds the next one around what's coming. [Coaching for a week that doesn't hold still](#) explains how that works, and [apply](#) tells me about your week. Otherwise: open your calendar, block three sessions for this week, and do Day A.

General education only, not medical advice. If you have a medical condition, are pregnant, or take medication, check with your doctor before changing how you train or eat.

Sources

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