

Getting Started

10 tips for a top first year

1. Adjust your expectations

Studying at tertiary level can be incredibly exciting and rewarding. However, there are many demands on you *and* adjustments you need to make. In addition to study, you may be getting used to longer travelling times to class, living away from home and adjusting to a whole new culture. Most importantly, never assume things are done the same way as before. Ask questions if you are not sure. You may also initially not do as well academically as you might have expected. It's best to see your study achievements here as a work-in-progress. Give yourself time to adjust, try things out and improve.

A major expectation at uni is that the primary responsibility for your study lies with you. University teachers will give advice, but not necessarily the answers. It is not *their* responsibility to pass you. Rather, you should develop your own perspectives and arguments, at times even disagreeing with your teachers. Developing study skills like independent research, constructing a logical argument and evaluating other people's arguments is important.

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2. Learn the culture

The different educational culture of a university can be challenging. For example, for international students, what is considered a good essay back home may often be completely different to what is considered acceptable here. Frequently, it is not until you have your first assessment returned that you realise the impact of studying in a different educational culture.

Such differences can include:

- Lecturers and students' roles and responsibilities

- The higher level skills required to complete study and assessment tasks
- Organising and presenting arguments and evidence.

Your faculty and subject area will have its own specific culture. It is very important that you understand this in order to perform well. You can do this by:

- Reading the departmental guidelines
- Asking your tutor for clarification
- Going to Academic Skills Unit workshops.

3. Make a Good Start

Making a good start is crucial to academic success. Attend faculty welcomes and other orientation activities and aim to attend *all* of your lectures, tutorials and/or lab sessions. Find your student centre office and faculty home page, main lecture venues, department noticeboard and computer labs as soon as you can.

The first few weeks of semester are excellent times to meet other people in your course and relevant academic staff. Important information about course structure, organisation and assessment will also be given in lectures and tutes early on. Don't be shy to approach tutors and fellow students then. It is expected that you will have many questions to ask and such early contacts can be very useful. Some questions might include:

- When are your tutor's consultation times?
- What is your department's policy for late or resubmitted work?
- How much independent study is expected outside of formal classes?

Lecturers and tutors, although busy with teaching, research and other commitments, are interested in your progress. It's important to let them know if you are having problems in your course. Otherwise, if you fail to submit work or stop attending classes, they may assume you have dropped out. If you need to contact

an academic staff member, make an appointment either directly by phone or email, or through the departmental office. Student centre staff such as student advisors can be another source of assistance.

Making connections with other students is also essential. Find out if there is a university club for people who share your interests, whether it be skiing, chess or chocolate. There are also clubs specifically for international students such as the Melbourne University Overseas Students Service (MUOSS). Sometimes your department offers mentor or buddy schemes for new students. Your peers at uni can be a good support network for your study too. This might mean introducing yourself for example to the person next to you in lectures or tutorials and suggesting a study group.

stay connected through clubs and associations

4. See the Big Picture

Consider how your course fits together as a whole. Examine your course outlines very carefully and try to determine how the topics and assessments link together and also fit in with the overall course objectives. Ask yourself:

- What are you expected to know or do, at the end of the course?
- What are the key issues or content areas?
- Are tutes or lab classes parallel with lectures?

Regularly reviewing your course content can help you to retain the key concepts in your long-term memory and is particularly useful for exams. Try and review your notes soon after the lecture, preferably within 24 hours and make the process active by considering such questions as:

- What were the main points?
- Are there any concepts I don't understand?
- Are there any gaps in my notes or references to be followed up?

Another active strategy is to annotate, highlight and/or summarise your notes rather than just re-writing them. You could also ask yourself if you remember things better if you see them or say them. Do you understand diagrams better than words? If you are a more visual learner, taking lecture notes and developing essay plans by using concept maps and colour coding might be useful. If you remember things better by listening or speaking, then discussing an assignment with other students might be preferable.

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5. Manage Your Time

While you may start university with good study intentions, you can very easily find yourself becoming overwhelmed. The workload required to complete a full-time degree is similar to that of a full-time job. Moreover, the university semester is much shorter than school semesters, the pace of learning accelerates sharply and you will have other commitments to manage. Time management is consequently crucial.

A weekly timetable is recommended. List work commitments, classes, important family, sporting or social events and other responsibilities and then determine what time is available for study. In most courses there are routine weekly tasks. Along with those assessments due on particular dates and revision of each week's lectures, labs and tutorials are also important. Allocate time for all these (along with regular short breaks). Diaries or weekly and daily 'to do' lists can also be useful.

Prioritise your tasks. You can't do everything, but you can always do something. Think about what is the most important task you need to get done in the time available and how it could be broken down into smaller ones. It is often the case that multiple assignments may be due at the same time. In this case you could set your own deadlines ahead of the true ones.

Also, give some thought to your study routines:

- Do you prefer to study late into the night, or are you a morning person?
- Do you use all available time (such as when travelling to university or breaks between classes) productively?
- Do you use the time when you concentrate well for more challenging tasks?

6. Lectures and Tutorials

Most courses have a combination of lectures, tutorials and/or labs. Lectures provide an opportunity to present central information to large numbers of students at a time. The information provided during lectures varies. Some lecturers provide handouts, or make notes available on the LMS, while others incorporate a small number of slides.

To get the most out of lectures, it's worth preparing for them. Always do some reading prior to the lecture as you are more likely to understand words and concepts if you are familiar with the content. During the lecture, listen actively to relate the content with what you already know. Listen for the ways in which the important ideas are emphasised; for example, signpost words such as 'first', 'for example', and 'to sum up'; repetition and pauses; and the use of gesture. Make note of new words and concepts. Effective note-taking of the main ideas and key points is important, but writing too much can mean missing important information. After the lecture, it's useful to compare your lecture notes with other students to check that you have the same main points and to fill in any missing information.

Tutorials give students the opportunity to go into topics in more depth and to discuss different ideas and views. Try to contribute to the discussion. Aim to say at least one thing in each tute. Listen carefully and think about what others have to say. Here are some ways to increase your participation:

- Complete the required readings/activities, review your lecture notes and prepare some questions or comments before the tutorial
- Listen to the ways in which other students agree, disagree and take turns speaking and then try such strategies yourself
- If you have to do a presentation, prepare and rehearse – you can obtain feedback on your presentation from an Academic Skills Unit advisor.

Asking questions often helps everyone in the group. Remember, your tutor does not have all the answers and you are expected to have your own informed explanations, perspectives and opinions.

7. Research and Reading

One of the first things you may notice about university is the large amount of reading required. You need to develop and express your own ideas based on the reading of appropriate resources. The primary places to find these resources are the university library and its website, so become familiar with these.

To get ready to do your research, find out what courses are run by the various libraries. Normally they run free research database searching courses along with other research skills courses. When you do your research, learn to be critical of information sources, especially those on the internet. This doesn't mean being negative but rather evaluating the quality of the source: its authority, currency and scope.

Given the amount of literature available, it is crucial that you prioritise your reading, read actively and with a clear purpose:

- Initially read texts that give an overview of the topic and identify the debate
- Scan the material first by reading the title, abstract, introduction, conclusion, and then (if required) the first and last lines of each paragraph
- Pay attention to transition and linking words that reflect connections between ideas like 'because', 'consequently', 'first', 'on the other hand' etc., so you can identify the line of argument and select the sections that require closer reading
- Rather than looking up every word you don't know, read the whole passage and only look up words that seem key to understanding the text, for example, words that are often repeated.

Use your reading to familiarise yourself with the specialised vocabulary of your subject. It might be helpful to start your own course dictionary, particularly if English is not your first language.

8. Writing strategies

Written assignments are a major component of university assessment and need to be prepared using a formal academic style.

Read each assignment task carefully, looking for direction words such as 'compare', 'evaluate' and 'discuss'. Find out how many words and references are required and whether there are any special rules. You also need to find out the appropriate academic style for the subject – you can do this by looking at the literature, the style of lectures and departmental handouts or websites. Note the format, structure, whether subheadings or diagrams are allowed and if there is any special sort of language and/or referencing system required.

Talking to other students as well as writing an essay outline are useful steps to help organise your information. Good writing takes time so you will need to do several drafts of each written task. You can take drafts of your essays, reports or written assignments to an Academic Skills Unit advisor for feedback.

The following strategies can also help:

- Keep a list of academic words used to introduce arguments and evidence and note phrases that are used to introduce ideas from other sources
- Gain a good overview of academic writing by enrolling in the online writing course AIRport at <https://airport.unimelb.edu.au>.



9. Referencing and Plagiarism

Effective and appropriate referencing is very important at university. A great deal of emphasis is put on each person developing and presenting their own perspective effectively. As a result, it is important to identify which ideas are yours, and which come from authors you have read. Learning how to integrate sources correctly in your writing is a skill assessed in most assignments. If you do not use references correctly you may be plagiarising.

Plagiarism can include:

- Using any information from a source (such as a book, journal or internet site) without referencing it
- Using an author's exact words without using quotation marks and referencing the page
- Writing an author's ideas in your own words but without referencing them.

Plagiarism may have serious consequences. Penalties can include loss of credit for a subject, to suspension or termination of enrolment.

Knowing how to use and acknowledge sources in your writing takes a bit of practice. Find out what referencing system your department uses – for example, Harvard, APA or MLA. A good basic guide to most faculties is available on the library website (<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/cite/index.html>). When you read academic writing, pay attention to how sources are used and what language is used to distinguish between the author's ideas and those of others. You can always attend an Academic Skills Unit workshop or have an individual appointment with one of our advisors to help improve your skills in this area.

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10. Know where to get help

Many students run into difficulties at some stage of their course. You are expected to be an independent learner, but that doesn't mean you have to handle all your problems by yourself. There are lots of people on campus who can help. A good start is the **Uni Life Directory** which contains a comprehensive list of services and facilities:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/unilife>

The **Student Centre** for your faculty is a good place for help with course-related questions such as enrollment and academic progress, course planning and graduate study. A list of all student centers is here:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/StudentCentre/centre/contact.html>

Academic Enrichment Services can offer assistance with many aspects of student life including careers and employment, assistance for international students, study skills improvement and disability services. More information is available at:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/aes/about/index.html>

Wellbeing Services can help you address any personal, emotional or financial problems that may impact on your study. These include counselling, chaplaincy, financial aid, housing, careers and legal aid. Their website gives more details:

<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/wellbeing>

The **Melbourne University Student Union** is another great source of information about student life and the university. Their Information Centre can be found on the ground floor of Union House and further information can be found on their website at:

<http://www.union.unimelb.edu.au/>

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