



STUDENTS SAY / What to expect from university

Katherine Ailles

Chemistry

University of York

University is very different to school: not only are you living away from home, but the teaching and way of working are also unique. Lectures are fast-paced, with little time to absorb the content. I have learnt that copying down as much information as possible during the lecture and then spending time afterwards reading through and making notes helps me digest the information and form links between key ideas. It is useful to try and complete this before the next lecture, so you don't fall behind. If there is something important you don't understand in the lecture you can always ask the lecturer afterwards.

When starting my degree, I was most surprised by how willing lecturers are to answer questions and go over ideas even after the course has finished. I had assumed lectures were the only time to learn and be given information at university, and that students and lecturers were otherwise disconnected. I couldn't have been more wrong: any questions I have are answered over email or in person.

As long as you keep on top of work and don't let it pile up then it is manageable. My main advice is don't focus only on your degree: take advantage of all the sports and societies on offer to make a wider range of friends and break up your academic work. I can't recommend enough becoming a member of a society, as it not only provides an outlet for stress, but has also introduced me to some of my best friends. Being part of a society or sport, such as netball, allows you to have other roles and responsibilities that not only look good on a CV but also allow you to gain new skills. As University of York Netball Club's treasurer, I have learnt to budget, as well as make important decisions and prioritize necessary expenses. Without netball I wouldn't have learnt these skills that will benefit me in the future.

STUDENTS SAY / The value in developing speaking skills

Zack Clarke

Economics

Teesside University

Speaking, as a skill, is not something most people would consider vital to the learning process. When I first started university, I certainly didn't think of it as one either. While I had never found speaking up a daunting task, I had never considered it as something extremely beneficial either. Throughout university, my opinion has completely changed. Whether it was through interactions in seminars or workshops, discussions with fellow students, or meetings with supervisors or lecturers, my communication skills have been pivotal in allowing me to work to my best ability.

There will undoubtedly be an extensive support network available to you at university, and having the confidence to speak to these people will improve your university experience considerably. There is even likely to be specific support available to assist you in improving your speaking and communication skills.

It won't take you long at university to understand the importance of speaking as a skill. Presentations are the prime example of this. Whether as part of a group or individually, presentations act as both a test of, and mode of improvement for, your speaking skills; and these skills will remain useful even outside of university. For example, I recently took part in a two-week placement through the university helping out at a local college, and having the ability to speak confidently to those I interacted with made the experience a lot more enjoyable and, in my opinion, allowed me to contribute far more to the role than I previously thought I would have been able to.

Other than the university support, developing speaking skills comes down to you, and it is very much a case of 'practice makes perfect'. Take part in discussions during seminars and workshops, join clubs and societies, volunteer or take up a part-time job. The amount of benefit you'll get out of them is up to you—my advice, enjoy yourself!



STUDENTS SAY / Tips on reading at university

Natasha Daniels

Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery (MB BChIR)

University of Cambridge

(previously Biomedical Sciences, King's College London)

When first beginning my degree the thing that struck me most was how much reading there was. I had zoomed through the Harry Potter series and enjoyed the watered-down textbooks at school, but I was completely unprepared for the nature of university reading. The sheer volume of papers and their complex language and content can seem extremely daunting at first, especially when you're trying to figure out how to feed yourself, make friends, and generally adapt to university life. An important thing to remember when approaching journals is that the abstract is key. Very often all the information you need can be found in the abstract, and it is not always necessary to work through the data (depending on the nature of your assignment). It's important to realize this, as it can save you huge amounts of time and tends to point out the juicy bits, as well as enabling you to scan the relevance of the paper.

The thing that always accompanies academic reading is referencing, which again tends to be daunting when you write your first essay. A great resource for this is 'Google Scholar', which references papers for you in the various formats (Harvard, Chicago, etc.). Always check which format your university uses before starting your reference list, and reference as you go along. There's nothing worse than having to back-track through all the papers you've read! I personally found OneNote a great resource to use: you can upload papers to it, and then highlight the important bits to review later. It's a great way to keep notes on reading lists, and as it's online you can access it anywhere. Highlighting is key; there's nothing worse than working through blocks of text to then forget where the important bits are when you review it later. When researching a topic, a great idea is to find a comprehensive

literature review on it, as this will introduce you to the topic as well as citing all the useful papers around it. When given a topic and a reading list that you're unfamiliar with, find a good literature review and it will significantly reduce your workload. Also, never underestimate the usefulness of older years, as they know what it's like to start from scratch, and are often keen to help!



STUDENTS SAY / Searching for strong evidence

Kathryn Harrington

Biomedical Science

Northumbria University

Two of the most useful skills I've gained from university are the ability to find strong evidence and the ability to reference this properly in my work. In school, we're mainly told 'don't use Wikipedia,' but there aren't really any other limits. At university, there are many more guidelines to follow—some which seem unnecessary at first. When I started my degree, we were given a list of textbooks and websites for finding online articles, journals, books, and lots of other resources. This can be slightly daunting when you realize just how many are available, and we're often faced with a lack of sympathy from people who won't stop telling us 'in my day we didn't have the internet, we had to read books!' Personally, I think there can be more pressure on us now to find evidence for assignments in a short amount of time, considering we have countless sources (mostly irrelevant) to scour through, which can be both amazing and a bit of a headache.

My advice to anyone beginning university and feeling a bit overwhelmed would be to remember that textbooks are a great starting point to learn the basics of a subject. However, review articles are often preferred as they're more up to date, and often more specific than a general textbook. To find the articles, I asked my lecturers for websites that provide online resources (specific to the type of degree I'm studying), typed key words into the search

tool, and tried to only use sources that were created within the last 10 years. This has proven to be almost fool-proof for finding the best evidence—reliable, reviewed, relevant. Most universities pay a subscription so their students can access a lot of online articles. Once you become familiar with the journal database it becomes easier to find what you're looking for. My other advice would be to seek help from librarians and make use of the specialist texts they hold, both in print and digitally.



STUDENTS SAY / The value of simply 'thinking'

Luna Hu

MSc in Nanotechnology and Regenerative Medicine

University College London

University is the time when I fully became aware of my thinking, and began to consciously develop independent and critical thoughts. Not only was it a necessary process to go through to get the most out of my degree, as there is no better way to contribute to a field than by challenging existing assumptions; but it was also essential for personal development. After the initial fresher's frenzy wore off, the imminence of adulthood, coupled with the overwhelming amount of life opportunities suddenly presented to me, triggered existential crisis after existential crisis. This is a fairly common phenomenon amongst 21st-century university students, thanks to the societal pressure of getting a decent job and the ever-increasing competition in securing them. I began questioning my own purpose, and what I landed on was that, given life's brevity, we should pursue whatever gives us satisfaction. Give up on chasing other people's dreams of money, fame, and power, and do things that bring you true satisfaction. After years of trial and error, through internships, events, societies, and most importantly, lots of thinking, I'm lucky to say I have found exactly that. Biomedical engineering was the optimal overlap of what I'm good at (physical chemistry) and what I feel passionate about (helping people through medicine).

Dedicating time for deep introspection can be truly life changing. It arguably also helped me make better friends, shifting my relationships from circumstantial friendships to people that I had much more in common with. Lecture content, coursework, and exams were never the most important part of a university education. The ability to think critically is truly the most valuable asset you can have.



STUDENTS SAY / Building confidence in speaking up

Kitty Luck

Human Bioscience

University of Northampton

Looking back to when I first joined the Human Bioscience course, I was very nervous, lacking the confidence to speak in large groups of people. I have now grown so much, not only academically but in my ability to speak up with my own views and opinions in large groups. The thought of speaking up used to put my fight or flight response into complete overdrive. It was the fear of others not agreeing with my views, but also what we humans fear the most—embarrassing ourselves or being wrong.

Being at university forces you to break through this inhibition, whether it's during presentations or being asked questions in seminars by lecturers. I think the main technique in overcoming this fear is to remember everybody feels the exact same way, which is why it is so important to speak to other students on your course. I forced myself to come out of my comfort zone, by becoming a student advocate and events coordinator for a charity. Both of these roles required me to express my ideas in front of large groups of people. Through doing these extracurricular roles, I no longer felt nervous about speaking up, and, eventually enjoyed being able to express my thoughts and ideas to others. This really helped me in interview processes and achieving my job as a Medical Lab assistant. I can now voice my opinions in meetings, and suggest innovative ideas in order to improve patient care in the NHS.



STUDENTS SAY / The importance of effective argument

Hal Meakin

Politics and Economics

Brunel University

It's almost a cliché that politics students love a good argument. Whether it's about taxation, equal representation, or nuclear detonation, I could always be presented with a good catchphrase or slogan to show me why I was wrong. These arguments weren't concerned with silly inconveniences like 'evidence,' but relied on recycling phrases generated by marketing professionals intent on creating a witty turn of phrase leaving your opponent stumped. I found that when engaging in any sort of verbal altercation, the most important thing was for people to *win*.

Instead of seeking to find common ground between equals, arguments seem to be becoming verbal weapons to cut down dissenters to 'common sense'. I couldn't seem to approach a debate without feeling like I was walking over eggshells; scared of saying the wrong thing or just apprehensive about being verbally assaulted, it was easier to keep my opinions to myself rather than share my point of view. Imagine . . . a politics student who avoids talking about politics.

It's easy to see that this culture can't be sustainable or even desirable. Not everyone wants to engage in a war of words, and the polarizing discourse won't solve any of the challenges facing the 21st century. To cut through the vacuous marketing propaganda that's masquerading as debate, we need the tools to think critically. Learning how to argue effectively, with civility and without alienating those around you, is essential for political discourse.

Crucially, engaging in critical thinking is recognizing that the way you win is more important than the winning itself.

STUDENTS SAY / Avoiding common pitfalls when reading at university

Nicole

Psychology

University of Plymouth

Throughout my life, I've always attracted the 'bookworm' label. I consume books in vast quantities and as such, I believed that recommended reading would be the easiest part of my BSc Psychology course to engage with. I was wrong! To prepare, we were asked to read one chapter per module. I set about this in the way only a perfectionist can, with a set of notes longer than the chapter itself, complete with colour coding, tables, graphs, and essay questions I conjured up myself. It took me three weeks to do one chapter, which I printed out at the local library, ecstatically watching the glossy pages being born from the printer.

Then university started, and with abject horror I realized that one chapter was the minimum essential reading per lecture. That's without mentioning recommended reading and additional journal articles. I struggled to keep up with the same standard, and floundered. So I stopped entirely because the idea of doing what I considered subpar work was awful. Exams loomed and I was forced to accept that what I had been trying to uphold was excessive—and found myself considering simply reading through the content and highlighting a few sections an achievement.

After exams, I realized that I hadn't used any colour-coded extra studies, the historical context, or the excessive information. What the additional reading had given me was well-rounded understanding and thorough context behind what I was learning in lectures. Rote-learning the texts was unnecessary. It was there to flesh out my understanding and to add more content. This approach was a symptom of my perfectionist attitude.

My perfectionism has set me back in several areas along my university journey, and I am learning to let it go! Ironically, it has set me back in the task of writing this feature, as I postponed it until I could think of the 'perfect subject to write about'. My advice would be that two minutes of awful work will get you further to where you need to be than procrastinating because you think it's not good enough. Also, to let go of unrealistic standards for yourself and your work!



STUDENTS SAY / Identifying strong evidence

Megan Robinson

MSc Applied Clinical Psychology

University of Central Lancashire

I think it is safe to say that finding relevant research can be painstaking. It can be frustrating, time consuming, and repetitive—but it can also be fun! After trying several different techniques, I discovered the best method for finding relevant papers is to use the university's journal search, and filter for academic papers for the most recent year, specific key terms, and literature reviews. Searching for recently published peer-reviewed literature reviews can really cut down reading time, as well as providing a helping hand for critiques and strength of evidence.

For me, the best part of writing an assignment is researching the chosen topic and then, as I am reading the papers, I consider the following questions:

1. *Why?*
2. And then what?

Thinking of these questions creates scope to query the strength of the evidence provided in that paper's results—for example, if the paper's 'method' section mentions the total number of participants, or participants' age but not gender, think: *why?* Was it predominately male or female participants? Would a dominant presence of one gender change the outcome? If the participants' occupations are not mentioned, think: *why?* Does this lack of information mean that the participants were students, managers, or held job titles that could alter the outcome? If the paper's 'introduction' section has little research that is recent or has a lot of references by the same researcher, think: *why?* Is the author unknowingly being biased toward their own research? Does recent research oppose the current hypothesis?

And then what?—I find that this question is better saved for when you are writing the 'conclusion' section—more precisely, the 'future research' part. Asking *and then what?* for the above *why?* allows creative space to consider how referenced papers can be improved, can highlight gaps in research, and can allow a critical eye to be placed on one's own strength of research.

Be patient; these things do take time. Ensure to set aside time to read, take in, and consider questions that arise whilst reading the journals. Use highlighters to help keep track of themes or patterns of criticism that may be uncovered whilst reading numerous papers.

After reading so many papers with a critical eye to ensure strong evidence, it can be difficult to turn off! You may find that you read or hear something outside of your studies. For example, you may find that you start to read the small print on TV adverts when a statistic appears stating that “85 percent of people who tried this face cream noticed dramatic effect!” —so be warned, asking *why?* And then *what?* can have lasting, but I feel positive, consequences.



STUDENTS SAY / The importance of critical thinking to my career

Ryan A. Stanyard

PhD in Neuroimaging

King's College London

In modern society, every aspect of what we do requires conversational fluency, etiquette, and confidence. Whether this is presenting your research in front of international audiences at conferences, writing succinct articles, or presenting what you hope is an innovative tool for a business. In my case, I began writing brief articles for organizations like the British Neuroscience Association, presenting at conferences, and working with businesses from the first year of my undergraduate degree. We often take for granted that psychology degrees provide us with a breadth of skills – critical thinking, an understanding of social and cognitive dynamics, and the abilities to market ourselves and relay complex, jargon-rife concepts in accessible language. Layer on an understanding of statistics, neurobiology and cognitive systems, and the applications for career paths truly expand.

As I began publishing and consulting, it became all the more clear that the BPS-accredited components of my undergraduate course not only paved the way for what I would need for my future

study (MSc, MRes, PhD), but meant that when I began appraising evidence for business solutions, I surprised myself with my insights. It can feel bizarre to realize that understanding sample numbers, experimental power, underlying effects, and so forth can be genuinely useful assets for creating tools for industry. This first became clear to me when working with an SME who was buying into a solution based on a sample of twenty-seven people, which was not all that convincing; I began to explain the limits of the sampling techniques of the approach, some flaws in the research design, and as I finished, I realized how much of my prior training was beginning to come into play.

Fast-forward a few years, and I continue to partner with SMEs, having taken up senior positions (Senior Consultant, CSO) at some firms whilst completing my PhD. This is actually an incredibly potent combination for those who are struggling to understand where their degree can take them, especially if you struggle to choose between the academic intrigue and the diversity and salary benefits of private industry. Networking with others, learning to listen, speak, think, and contextualize and evaluate your ideas is integral wherever you go, undeniably so in my experience. My advice? Test your skills, get experience, and enjoy growing.