

The Fresher's First 30 Days: A Starter Study Plan for New University Students

What to do in the first month of university, week by week, so the term does not get away from you

NEW STUDENTS AND FRESHERS

A week-by-week starter plan for new university students: lectures, reading, notes, timetables, catching up and the first 30 days.

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Your first week: what is actually happening

The first week of university is not about learning. It is about finding out where everything is and who to ask. Students who treat week one as a study sprint arrive at week two exhausted and behind. Students who treat it as a logistics project arrive with a timetable, three names in their phone and a clear idea of what the course expects.

Day 1: induction and registration. You will be given a lot at once: campus maps, IT accounts, library cards, safety briefings, and a version of the academic calendar you should photograph with your phone. Do exactly that. Nobody remembers what is written on a slide shown once in a room of 300 people.

The most important thing you do on day one is find out **where the reading list lives** and **how you submit work**. Two questions. Ask at the induction desk, ask the lecturer, ask a second-year in the subject. Write the answers down.

Days 2–3: the teaching week begins. First sessions are usually tasters or induction lectures. Some courses open with an overview of the assessment structure, which sounds like padding and is not: it tells you how many pieces of assessed work there are, what each is worth, and how long each takes. Note those with dates.

Days 4–5: the first real lectures. These are the ones people try to absorb on day one. Do not. The purpose of the first lecture is to work out the shape of the subject: what vocabulary you need, how the lecturer organises the material, what they treat as obvious. You are building a mental map, not learning content.

Days 6–7: the weekend before it matters. Most students decide here that sets the tone of the term: reading list open with a plan, or a weekend of "recovery" that leaves you starting week two with nothing.

The first week is not for catching up. It is for building the machine that will let you catch up later.

The five things to have working by the end of week one

1. **A working timetable block.** Two or three fixed slots per week, protected as if they were lectures. Even 90 minutes each.
2. **A deadline register.** One page: every assessed deadline, exam date and reading week date, with the week number next to each. Update it every Sunday.
3. **The reading list, downloaded.** Every item, saved now while the database still works and the links are live. Books marked "available in the library" often are not, and the reserve shelf has a three-day loan limit.
4. **Three names.** One lecturer or module leader, one administrative contact, one classmate who seems to know how things work.
5. **A place to work.** On campus, find the room you will actually use. At home, clear the kitchen table.

What to say to your lecturer in week one

Two questions work in the first session of every module:

1. "What do you expect students to have read before the next session?"
2. "Is there a reading list or slides I should follow, and where do you post them?"

That is enough. It shows you are taking the subject seriously without performing enthusiasm you do not have. Lecturers remember students who ask a precise question, not those who stay silent for twelve weeks.

Reading, lectures and the three ways a week can go

University reading is not the same as reading, and most students lose whole terms to the difference.

Reading for information. You want the shape of an argument: what the author claims, what evidence they use, what they assume. Speed matters more than detail. Skim first — abstract, introduction, headings, conclusion — then read the sections that look load-bearing.

Reading for argument. You are reconstructing a claim you could defend or attack in a tutorial. You need the evidence, not just the conclusion, and you should write as you read.

Reading for reference. One specific thing — a definition, a theorem, a date. That is what reference books and search tools are for.

Most assigned reading is the first kind. Some is the second. Almost none is the third, yet students spend hours on reference material because it feels like studying.

The lecture-to-review-time ratio

A rough, tested rule: **for every hour of lecture, plan two hours of independent work.** One hour preparing the next lecture, one hour reviewing the last. If a module has 10 lecture hours a week, that is 20 hours of independent work — which sounds brutal until you realise reading is not the same as sitting at a desk staring at a wall.

Situation	Lecture hours	Independent hours	Weekly total	Realistic?
Reading-heavy humanities module	10	25–30	35–40	Yes, if you read on paper and take notes actively
Stem module with problem sets	12	24–30	36–42	Yes, if problem sets are done weekly, not in a rush
Assessment-heavy final-year module	8	30–40	38–48	Yes, but term-time pressure rises
Group project module	6	20–25	26–31	Yes, plus meeting time you cannot control
Part-time or employed	5	12–15	17–20	Yes — cut lecture replay, keep reading
Week 11, revision term	6	35–50	41–56	Only if the term started on time

The ratio is not about precision. It is that students under-budget independent work, then blame themselves at the end. Budget it up front.

The three ways a week can go

Every week goes one of three ways, and the difference is almost always whether you read **before** the session that needed it.

Week type A: prepared. You read before the lecture. The lecture confirms what you already half-know, the tutorial feels like a conversation, and you end with notes you will actually use. Cost: 2–3 hours of reading per module per week.

Week type B: reactive. You did not read. The lecture introduces new material at speed, you understand perhaps 40 per cent in the room, the tutorial asks questions you cannot answer, and you spend Sunday reconstructing the lecture from slides. Cost: 8–10 hours, and you still understand less.

Week type C: detached. You did not read, the lecture went over your head, you avoided the tutorial, and you have decided this week will be reclaimed later. It will not be. Cost: 2 hours of avoidance now, then 15 hours of catch-up in week seven plus guilt.

You do not need to understand everything. You need to understand enough to ask a useful question.

The rule is unglamorous: **read before the session, always, even if the reading is only twenty minutes.** Pre-reading converts a type B week into a type A week more reliably than any note-taking technique.

How to read a chapter in 30 minutes

1. **Read the abstract, introduction and conclusion (5 minutes).** Write the single sentence that says what this chapter argues.
2. **Scan the headings (2 minutes).** Turn them into questions: "Why does the author say this here?"
3. **Read the section that matters most (15 minutes).** Slow down. Underline only what you would want to quote in an essay.
4. **Write three lines of your own (5 minutes).** Your words, not the author's. If you cannot write three lines, you have not understood it.
5. **Note one question (3 minutes).** For the tutorial or the next lecture. This is the highest-return habit in this guide: **one question per session, 8–10 per week.**

That is 30 minutes per chapter. Three modules and two readings each is 3 hours a week. It fits.

Managing the readings you will not finish

You will not finish everything. Every student does not finish everything. The design problem is deciding what to skip without getting caught.

- **Always do:** the section the lecture covers, the extract quoted in the reading list, anything the lecturer has singled out.
- **Do if you can:** the recommended primary text, in order.
- **Skip if you must:** supplementary and "further reading" items — genuinely optional until essay-writing week.
- **Never skip:** the assignment instructions, the mark-up of the assessment criteria, the week-1 and week-2 slides.

What to do in the 10 minutes after a lecture

1. One line: what today's session was about.
2. Three keywords or terms you did not understand.
3. One question to bring to the next session.

Three lines is enough. Anything more and you will stop doing it.

Notes are not a transcript. Notes are a set of handles you can use to pull the full idea back later.

Notes that are worth having later

Most students take notes they will never read again. That is a design error, not a moral failure. Note-taking is a retrieval system, and most people's systems are built for writing rather than remembering.

The test of a good note: **six weeks later, can you rebuild the lecture's argument from your notes in ten minutes?**

Five methods, honestly compared

Method	Best for	Strength	Weakness	Time per lecture
Cornell (cue + notes + summary)	First-year science and social science	Forces a summary; the summary doubles as revision	Slow; you may fall behind a fast lecturer	45–60 min
Outline	Humanities, seminars, argument-based subjects	Fast; mirrors how essays are structured	Loses nuance and your reaction	20–25 min
Cornell + mind map	Modules with several linked theories	Shows how concepts connect	Can sprawl; cap at one page	50–60 min
Bullet + margin questions	Seminars with strong discussion	Margin questions become tutorial ammo	Needs a specific question habit	25–30 min
Digital one-note, plain text	Anyone who can type fast	Searchable; syncs to a phone	Copy-paste becomes a trap	30–40 min
Audio + written summary	Very fast or messy speakers	Replayable; low writing burden live	Summarising later takes real time	10 min live, 20 later

If you are unsure: **Cornell for anything with facts, numbers or mechanisms. Outline for anything with arguments or debates.** That rule will do more for you than any app.

The Cornell page, concretely

Take a page. Divide it: a narrow right-hand column, about 2.5 cm, and a wide left column.

- **Right column (cue column).** After the lecture, questions or keywords that test your understanding: "Why does the author treat 1929 as a turning point?"
- **Left column (notes).** Your notes, in your own words, shortened. Numbers, names, dates, mechanisms. Diagram anything with structure.
- **Bottom strip (summary).** Two to three sentences in your own words, written after the lecture, not during.

The summary strip is the part students skip and the part that pays. It is a 48-hour-old test: if you cannot write it, you did not understand the session, and you now know what to re-read.

Summarising is not a formality. It is the part of note-taking where you discover what you did not understand.

Bad note: "Industrial Revolution — started 1760, steam engine, factories, lots of changes, see slides slides slides." Undated, unsourced, 20 words of slide transcript.

Good note: "C18: Industrial Rev. — Watt's separate condenser (1765) raised efficiency; coal over wood; factory system concentrated labour; >50% of GDP shift to industry by 1840. Q: why did it start in Britain? Gap: wages high + cheap coal + stable institutions (North thesis)."

Same content. The second is searchable, arguable and re-usable.

A weekly note-cleaning routine

Twenty-five minutes, Sunday, every week. Not optional, and not "when I have time".

1. **Stack (5 min).** Collect every page from the week. Nothing else.
2. **Sort (5 min).** Label each page: lecture, reading, seminar, problem set, admin.
3. **Summarise (10 min).** One summary line per session. Seven lines becomes your weekly overview sheet.

4. **Question (5 min).** Collect every margin question into one running list — your tutorial and revision ammunition.

Those 25 minutes replace two hours of panicked re-reading before an exam.

Twenty-five minutes on Sunday is the price of not spending Easter revision relearning the whole term.

Where to keep notes

Keep three things separate, each with one home: **live notes** (the messy in-class record, paper or one digital file per module), **permanent notes** (the clean, versioned, one-idea-per-note store — OneNote, Obsidian, or one document per module), and **exam notes** (the summary sheets you build in revision, from the permanent notes rather than the raw lecture pages). The common mistake is keeping only the first: six weeks in you will have 40 pages of live notes and no way to retrieve the argument inside them.

The study timetable you will actually keep

Every student says they will make a timetable. Most make one in the first week, abandon it in the third, and return to working whenever they feel like it, which is never.

A timetable you keep has to be built around the life you already have. Three rules:

1. **Schedule the same number of hours every week.** Not "more when I have time". A flat 15 hours a week beats a 30-hour plan that collapses in week three.
2. **Put your hardest work in your best hours.** If you are sharp 9–12am, that block is for the reading you find hardest. If you are sharp in the evening, it is for problem sets.
3. **Schedule breaks as part of the plan.** 50 minutes on, 10 off, 30-minute break after two sessions. Breaks that are not scheduled get taken anyway.

A weekly timetable template

Fill this in with your actual fixed commitments first, then place study into the gaps.

Day	09:00–10:00	10:00–12:00	12:00–14:00	14:00–16:00	16:00–18:00	18:00–20:00	Evening
Mon	Lecture	Study block A	Break	Reading	Study block B	Reading	20:00 wind-down, no study
Tue	Lecture	Study block A	Break	Seminar prep	Free	Study block B	Plan tomorrow
Wed	Lecture	Study block A	Break	Reading	Free	Seminar	Deadline check (10 min)
Thu	Seminar	Study block A	Break	Reading	Study block B	Reading	20:00 wind-down
Fri	Lecture	Study block A	Break	Reading	Free	Study block B	Weekly review prep
Sat	Sleep in	Deep work block (3 hrs)	Break	Reading / problem set	Free	Free	Rest
Sun	Free	Weekly review (60 min)	Break	Catch-up block (2 hrs)	Free	Catch-up block (2 hrs)	Plan the week (15 min)

Bold blocks are protected study. Saturday and Sunday carry the flex: if you are on track, Saturday is genuinely off; if you are behind, Sunday's two catch-up blocks absorb the gap.

Building your real timetable: a 30-minute procedure

1. **List every fixed commitment (10 min).** Lectures, labs, seminars, commuting, work, family, appointments, sport, in time order.
2. **Mark your peak hours (2 min).** Cross out the two or three windows when you think best. These are non-negotiable.
3. **Place four anchor blocks (5 min).** Four 90-minute blocks across the week, each in a peak window, each the same activity type so they become automatic.
4. **Place one weekly review (3 min).** Sunday, 60 minutes, fixed.
5. **Place one catch-up block (3 min).** Sunday afternoon, 2 hours, kept even if unused.
6. **Add the rest as "flex" (3 min).** Reading, problem sets, essay drafts. These fill gaps; they do not define the week.
7. **Test it (4 min).** Is the total between 15 and 25 hours? Higher is not better. Adjust the number of anchor blocks, not the hours in each.

The 30-minute version, for the weeks you cannot do more

Some weeks are simply full. That is normal and it is not failure. The rule is to never let study hit zero, because restarting from zero is far harder than continuing from small.

If you only have...	Do this	Do not do this
5 minutes	Read the week's brief or one page of a key text, out loud	Scroll, then feel guilty
15 minutes	Read one section and write three summary lines	"Just skim" with no notes
30 minutes	One focused block: read 20 pages, or attempt one problem set question, or outline one paragraph	Two tasks badly
60 minutes	Prepare for tomorrow's session and review yesterday's, half each	New module, mid-term
2 hours	The anchor work for one module, full depth	Three modules at a third depth each
A whole Sunday	Weekly review + two catch-up blocks	Panicking about the whole term

Fifteen minutes counts. Fifteen minutes on six days is one and a half hours, and one and a half hours is a term.

When your timetable breaks

It will break. Lectures overrun, group work takes three times as long as expected, you get ill. That is arithmetic, not a character flaw.

1. **Missed one block:** move it to the next flex slot. Do not double up.
2. **Missed two blocks:** drop one anchor block and accept a smaller target. A smaller target you hit beats a full target you abandon.
3. **Missed a week:** do not try to make it up at triple the volume. Use the 30-minute version for three days, then rebuild the anchor blocks at half size for a week.
4. **Missed two weeks:** talk to your lecturer or academic adviser now, not in week twelve. Asking early is normal; asking late is what causes problems.

Once a month, look at where your hours actually went. Keep a simple log and mark each block done, half-done or skipped. After four weeks you will know your real capacity, not your intended one. If you are completing only 60 per cent of your plan, shrink it by 40 per cent. The plan that fits your life beats the plan that flatters you.

Finding the free resources your course is built on

Most textbooks your course lists are available free, legally, in some form. This is not a back door; it is how universities have been teaching for a decade. You need to know where to look, and how to check a copy is legitimate.

The free library, by what it is good for

Resource	What it is	Best for	One title a first-year student would want
OpenStax	Peer-reviewed open textbooks, free PDF and online	Science, maths, economics, business, nursing	<i>Principles of Economics 3e</i> (covers the whole first-year micro/macro course)
MIT OpenCourseWare	Full course materials from MIT: notes, assignments, exams	Maths, engineering, physics, computing	<i>18.01SC Single Variable Calculus</i> (the full first-year calculus sequence)
Project Gutenberg	Over 70,000 public-domain ebooks, plain text and EPUB	Literature, history, classics	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i> (over 200,000 free downloads)
Open Library	Internet Archive's catalogue, with borrowing and lending	Finding a specific title; checking what is legally free	<i>Things Fall Apart</i> (borrowable digital copy)
Internet Archive	Millions of scanned texts, audio and video; controlled digital lending	Out-of-print books, journals, archival sources	<i>The Great Gatsby</i> (1925 edition, borrowable)
LibreTexts	A wiki-style library of open textbooks across many subjects	Chemistry, biology, physics, maths, social sciences	<i>Introduction to Psychology</i> (the standard first-year text)
Open Textbook Library	A searchable catalogue of openly licensed textbooks, faculty-reviewed	Finding a peer-reviewed open text for almost any module	<i>Writing Guide with Handbook</i> (first-year academic writing)
Khan Academy	Free lessons, videos and practice problems	Maths, physics, statistics, economics, revision	<i>College Algebra</i> and <i>AP College Physics</i> problem sets
DOAB	Directory of Open Access Books — peer-reviewed open academic books	Humanities and social sciences, essay writing	Open-access monographs from the directory's listings
PubMed Central	Free full-text archive of biomedical and life-science papers	Health, medicine, biology, evidence-based essay work	Open-access <i>PLOS Medicine</i> articles on topics like antibiotics

How to check that a copy is legitimate

Searching for a textbook produces pirated sites within the first three results, some of them malware farms dressed up as libraries.

The rule: an open copy is legitimate if the rights holder has released it, and you can prove that from the copy itself.

1. **Look for a licence statement.** Creative Commons (CC BY, CC BY-SA, CC BY-NC) or a Public Domain Mark, in the front matter or on the download page.

2. **Look for the rights holder's own site.** OpenStax, MIT OCW, LibreTexts and Project Gutenberg host the files themselves. That is the definitive source.
3. **Check the metadata, not the file name.** A file called `textbook.pdf` with no publisher, author or licence is not a free textbook. It is someone's upload.
4. **Avoid any site** that asks you to disable an ad blocker, "download with our app", or pay to remove a watermark. That is the pattern of a pirate site.
5. **When in doubt, ask.** Your library's "ask a librarian" service is free, fast, and specifically for this.

Free should mean free because the author or publisher said so. If the licence is missing, you do not have a free book, you have stolen property with a download button.

Finding the specific module reading

The reading list is often a mix: a textbook chapter, a journal article, a web page, a video, an episode.

Habit 1: search by exact title plus author. Put the title in quotes, add the author's surname, and add `site:` for the likely host if the list names one. For a journal article, add the journal name: the publisher's version and the open-access version are often both findable, and the open-access one may sit on the author's institutional page.

Habit 2: check the library's link resolver before paying. Almost every university subscribes to the big databases, and many articles are paywalled only because the article was bought, not because the author wanted payment. Your library's "find it" service will often get you the PDF legally — via an open repository or an inter-library loan. That is normal and free.

When a book is not free anywhere

1. **Check the library's print and short-loan reserves.** Many required texts sit on a two-hour reserve shelf, on campus, free to read in the building.
2. **Ask the lecturer.** Some modules are designed around a specific extract, and that extract is usually much shorter than the book.
3. **Use the inter-library loan.** Slow, but it exists.
4. **Use a second-hand copy.** A used physical copy is a purchase, not a free resource, but it is legitimate and often a third of the price.

Once a term, spend 30 minutes saving the resources you will keep using — library database links, module pages, the open textbooks for your heaviest modules, the reading lists — in one indexed folder.

When you fall behind: a catch-up plan that works

Falling behind is not a moral problem. It is a scheduling problem with a specific cause: a bad week, a bad fortnight, or reading that grew faster than your reading speed. It happens to nearly everyone.

What separates students who recover from students who do not is not guilt. It is triage.

Behind is a state you can measure. Guilt is a mood you can only feel. Measure it.

Step 1: measure the gap honestly

Take a sheet of paper. For each module, write the assignment or exam, its weight, the date it is due, and how much preparation you have actually done. Be specific: "read 2 of 5 chapters", not "some reading".

Then work out how many days you have left for each module, and sort by **urgency**, not by guilt. The module due in four days with nothing done comes first, even if another module is worth more and you have half-finished it.

Step 2: triage by category

Every outstanding item is one of four things, and each has a different response.

Category	Example	Response	Time needed
Must do, small	Weekly problem set, short reading, attendance	Do it now, quickly, properly	30–90 min
Must do, large	3,000-word essay	Start immediately; do 20 per cent of it this week	6–10 hrs total, spread
Should do, small	Recommended reading, background	Read summaries and the extract; do not read the chapter	20 min
Should do, large	"Read this book"	Read the chapter the task depends on, plus a summary	1 hr

The mistake is treating all four identically. Reading "the whole textbook" for a task citing three pages is a week of work for nothing.

Step 3: apply the catch-up plan by how far behind you are

Weeks behind	Diagnosis	The plan	Realistic daily hours
0–1 week	Normal drift, easily fixed	Take the missed weekly reading (2 hrs), reschedule the missed block into Sunday, resume the timetable	2–4
1–3 weeks	The reading backlog has built up	Do the last two weeks of reading, one module at a time, in timetable order. Suspend all optional reading	4–6
3–6 weeks	You have missed most of a module's reading	Ask the lecturer which 3 items on the reading list matter most. Read those. Do past papers instead of reading everything	6–8
6–10 weeks	A module is effectively unstarted, or a deadline has passed	Talk to the lecturer and module leader this week. Find out about extensions, resubmission, alternative assessment. Read only the recent 2–3 items	6–8, plus admin time
A term or more	Something has gone wrong beyond scheduling	Book an appointment with your personal tutor and your school's welfare or study-support service. This is what they are for	Varies

The third row works because most modules are genuinely assessable from a small core of the reading list, and the fourth row works because only a lecturer knows whether a late submission is possible.

Step 4: the five-hour catch-up day

- Hour 1: triage.** The sheet from step 1, sorted by urgency and category. Decide what "done" means for each item, in writing.
- Hours 2–3: the oldest module.** Start at the back of the pile. It is the one most likely to have slipped entirely, and the one where starting is hardest.
- Hour 4: the newest deadline.** Work on the thing due soonest. Momentum here beats perfect coverage.
- Hour 5: the pass.** Tidy notes, write the questions you have accumulated, and plan tomorrow's first block. Ending on a plan is what makes you start again tomorrow.

Recovery is not a single heroic weekend. It is three ordinary evenings where you do slightly more than the evening before.

Step 5: prevent the next gap

The cycle repeats because the same three causes recur. Deal with each directly:

- **The reading grew faster than your reading speed.** Cap the list: for every item, decide in the first two minutes whether it is Must or Should. Should items are summaries only.
- **Deadlines arrived together.** Map the assessment calendar the moment you see it. When three deadlines land in the same fortnight, front-load.
- **You did not get help.** More than three weeks behind with no contact is the failure point. Send one email.

What to say when you ask for help

Keep it factual and specific. "I am behind on the reading for Module X and worried about the essay due on the 14th. Which three items on the reading list matter most?" gets a useful answer. "I am struggling with university" gets a sympathetic reply and no action.

Exams, and the two weeks before them

Exam preparation is a skill you can learn in your first year, and most students never learn it because they prepare in the wrong way: they re-read their notes. Re-reading feels productive and produces almost nothing in the exam.

What works is **active recall** — retrieving information from memory with no notes in front of you — and **practice under conditions** — timed answers that resemble the real thing.

You do not revise what you recognise. You revise what you can produce from an empty page.

A two-week revision plan

Days	Focus	Daily work	Output
14–13	Take stock	List every module, weight, exam length, format. Pull the past papers. Build a revision timetable	A one-page plan and 5–8 past papers
12–10	First pass	Read/skim each module's core material. Make condensed notes: 2 pages per topic, key terms, arguments, numbers	Condensed notes for all modules
9–7	Active recall	Blank page, module by module. Write everything you remember about a topic, then check against notes. Mark gaps in red	Recall sheets, gaps marked
6–4	Fill the gaps	Re-read only the parts you failed to recall. Re-do the problems you got wrong	Gap work done, red marks cleared
3–2	Past papers	One full paper per module under timed conditions. Mark it with the mark scheme	2–3 papers marked, weak areas identified
1	Light review	Read your own summary sheets and marked papers. Nothing new. Sleep properly	Confidence
Exam day	—	Arrive 20 minutes early, check the paper, do the easy question first	Paper done

Active recall, step by step

1. **Write the topic on a blank sheet.** e.g. "Three causes of the 1929 Wall Street Crash".
2. **Set a timer for 5 minutes.** Write everything you can about that topic from memory. Diagrams, dates, names, causes, consequences.
3. **Check against your notes.** Green for what you got right, red for what you missed entirely, amber for half-right.
4. **Fill the red gaps only.** Read or re-watch only the material covering those gaps. Five to ten minutes.
5. **Repeat for the next topic.** Do not start a new topic until the gaps are filled.
6. **Repeat the whole cycle a week later.** Revisit the sheets after 1, 3, 7 and 14 days.

For a 12-topic module, that is roughly 6–8 hours spread over a fortnight. Not more work than rereading. Less work, and it works.

Practice answers, not just practice papers

Ten past papers teaches you the exam's shape. Writing full answers teaches you about the marking.

1. **Take one past paper.** Note the word count per question and the time per mark (usually 2–4 minutes per mark for essays).
2. **Write one full answer** to one question, timed.
3. **Get it marked properly.** Ask a lecturer, a peer, or a study-support service. Many universities run free writing workshops and one-to-one clinics; use them even if it feels awkward.
4. **Look at the gap between your answer and the good answer.** It is usually structure, not knowledge: it answers the question asked, has a clear line, uses evidence, ends with a judgement.
5. **Write the same question again, better.**

Repeat for three or four questions and you will improve more in a fortnight than in six weeks of rereading.

The week of the exam

- **Learn the format.** Open-book or closed-book, word count, number of questions, how many you must answer, how the marks split. Getting this wrong loses marks for free.
- **Practise the timing.** If it is 2 hours and 3 questions, that is 40 minutes each. Decide the order in advance.
- **Build a formula sheet and a list of key quotes, dates and numbers,** if the exam rewards it. One page per module.
- **Do the practice on paper, in a quiet room, without a phone.**
- **Sleep.** Seven hours for the three nights before. An all-nighter measurably reduces recall of the material you revised.

The night before an exam, the highest-return activity is sleep. Everything else you could do is worth less than you think.

Revision groups

Two or three people who meet for 60 minutes, twice a week, to quiz each other, works far better than reading alone.

- **Each person brings 20 questions on one topic.** That is the preparation.
- **Each person answers without notes, for 5 minutes.** Then the group checks.
- **Whoever hosts runs it on time and stops at 60 minutes.** Hosting is what keeps it alive.

Exam day itself

1. **Arrive 20 minutes early.** Check the room, the desk, the rules on notes and calculators.
2. **Read the whole paper twice, before writing.** Note what each question asks and how many marks it carries.
3. **Decide the order.** Start with the question you can answer well, then the one you can do partially. Save the hardest for last if it is worth fewer marks than it takes.
4. **Answer the question asked.** A well-written answer to the wrong question scores nothing.
5. **Plan before writing on essay questions.** Three lines: point, evidence, so what. Then write.
6. **Leave ten minutes at the end** to check every part of every question. Underlining the question and ticking each part takes 30 seconds and regularly saves 10 marks.
7. **Check the practical details.** Number of pages, right booklet, clock on the wall.

Money, admin and the things nobody mentions

University is expensive in ways that are hard to predict and annoying to fix late.

The money conversation

Know your income and outgoings in the first fortnight. One spreadsheet, two columns. Most students are shocked by what a term costs once travel, food, printing, replacement books and socialising are counted.

Common surprise	Typical cost per year	How to reduce it
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The four money moves that actually work.

1. **Check for support early.** Every university has a hardship fund, a travel bursary, an emergency grant and usually a career development grant that most students never apply for. Applying takes 20 minutes and requires you to have applied before the crisis — so apply in week two, not week twelve.
2. 3. **Learn the library's fine and loan rules.** Renewing online takes 20 seconds.
3. **Do not wait for the emergency.** If you are a week from payday and out of money, your department office, students' union and international student adviser all have short-term options.

Admin you will forget to do

Task	When	Consequence of missing it
Enrol and confirm your registration	Week 1	You may not be on the module list; system access can be withheld
Activate your university email	Day 1	Everything — deadlines, room changes, VLE notices — goes there first
Link your VLE accounts and turn on notifications	Week 1	You miss the announcement that changed the reading
Complete compulsory online modules (integrity, data protection, safety)	Week 1–2	Marks or registration held against you
Apply for a student discount, travel pass or bursary	Week 2–4	Money you will not get back
Register with a GP and a dentist	Week 1–4	Free NHS care you then pay for privately without realising
Submit your first assignment correctly (check the rubric's format)	Week 3–4	Marked down for formatting, not content
Complete mid-year and end-of-year funding checks	As notified	Payments stopped, or your visa affected

Most university admin problems are not difficult. They are late. Being thirty days early turns a five-minute task into a five-minute task; being thirty days late turns it into a week of emails.

Housing, food and health

- **Sort your accommodation properly** and get a tenancy agreement with a deposit protection scheme in place. Photograph the room on day one — deposit disputes are decided on evidence.
- **Meal plan in advance.** Cooking once on Sunday for five days is cheaper and faster than cooking every evening. Two hours of cooking produces about 12 portions.
- **Register with a GP.** It is free, it takes an appointment, and the first one can take weeks.
- **Know your mental health service and your students' union,** and put both numbers in your phone on day one, along with the out-of-hours crisis line. Having the number saved is not the same as needing it, and it is the same when you do.
- **Keep a consistent sleep time.** A regular wake time, including weekends, matters more than the hours for memory consolidation.

If you are an international student

1. **Check your visa conditions and sponsor obligations.** Know what your CAS required, what "report to the university" means, and what happens if you miss a checkpoint.
2. **Track your work-hours entitlement.** Most student visas allow a limited number of hours per week in term. Know the number, keep a log.
3. **Do not assume you can work in the summer.** Some visa types restrict full-time work outside term. Check before you plan on it.
4. **Keep documents current:** passport validity, visa conditions, ATAS certificate if relevant, copies of everything in one folder you can reach in five minutes.
5. **Use the international student adviser early.** The answers are specific to your visa.

If money is genuinely tight

- **Apply for every fund the university offers.** Hardship funds, travel bursaries, emergency grants, textbook loans. They exist for exactly this and most go unclaimed.
- **Get paid work early.** Universities, the students' union, local businesses and the careers service all hire students. A 10-hour week in term fits a 15-hour study plan if it is scheduled, not absorbed.
- **Sell what you have.** Second-hand books, equipment, notes from previous years, unused subscriptions.
- **Ask for a deadline extension before the deadline.** Extensions for caring responsibilities, illness and employment are normal, documented requests, and nearly always granted when asked early with evidence.

Mature students and part-time study

- **Your time is less fragmented, which is an advantage.** Use long blocks for the hard reading, not for admin.
- **Family and caring responsibilities are real constraints, not excuses.** Tell your personal tutor early, in writing, so the department knows what your deadline pressure looks like. Disclosure is what makes flexibility possible.
- **Two or three modules is the standard load for part-time.** Resist the sixth module that looks like free money; it is a full course, and the one that collapses in exam season.
- **Your professional experience is a genuine academic asset.** Translate it into academic language — "I managed a team of six" becomes "I led a team of six in a six-month service delivery project" — and use it as evidence, not as a shortcut past the reading.

For first-generation and mature students

If nobody in your family has been to university, the rules of the place are invisible. You cannot ask around at dinner. Everything is written down somewhere, but nobody points at it.

The invisible rules

You are expected to ask, and asking is not a sign of weakness. Lecturers prefer a direct question in week three to silence followed by a crisis in week eleven.

The system is designed for the confident and prepared, and you can work around that. Reading ahead, asking for extensions, applying for bursaries, requesting feedback — all of it can be requested by you, but you have to know the request exists.

Your belonging is not automatic. Students who grew up near a university assume the social side sorts itself out. It does not, for anybody.

Nobody is tracking you the way you fear. Lecturers teach 50 to 300 students.

The things no one tells first-generation students

1. **Office hours are free and normal.** They are usually listed on the module page. Bring a specific question: "I am stuck on the second paragraph of question 3 — is my reading of the argument right?" Not "can you explain the module."
2. **Your personal tutor is assigned to you.** They exist for exactly this. Book a first meeting in week two, even with nothing specific.
3. **Careers services are not for final-year students only.** CV clinics, mock interviews, placement support, and often specific schemes for first-generation and mature students.
4. **Financial support is a process, not a favour.** Applications have criteria and deadlines. Bring documentation early.
5. **The library's "ask" service is free.** Reference librarians answer questions about sources, referencing and search. That is what they are for.

6. **Referencing is a learned technical skill, not a talent.** Plagiarism is often accidental. Learn the citation style in week one and use the reference manager your library provides.

Being the first in your family is not a deficit to be fixed. It is a set of conditions you are allowed to design around.

A first-week survival list for first-generation students

Do this	When	Why
Write down every term you do not understand (imposter, module, credits, seminar, deadline, formative, summative)	Week 1, 20 min	Vocabulary is the barrier; the words are not defined anywhere obvious
Book a 30-minute meeting with your personal tutor	Week 2	Establishes the relationship before you need it
Ask the library for a 20-minute "how to find and cite sources" session	Week 2	Removes a recurring source of silent stress
Find the marking criteria for each assessment and where the rubric lives	Week 3	Marks are given against criteria; this is the system, not cheating
Find out how extensions work	Week 3, before you need one	You will not get one retroactively
Apply for every fund you qualify for	Week 2–4	Money you do not have to repay
Get one piece of work marked by a human before it counts	Early	Feedback is only useful if it arrives before submission

Mature students

Your prior knowledge is an asset, but it is not course credit. You may not know the terminology, the citation conventions, the assessment genres. The gap between knowing something and writing it in academic form is what your first assignments will test.

Reframe "I am behind". You are behind on the academic scaffolding, not on the life. If you have not written an essay in fifteen years, the first one is about genre, not subject knowledge.

Use your experience in every assignment. Concrete professional examples, with numbers, are stronger evidence than vague claims.

Protect your study time ruthlessly. Choose one protected block of 90 minutes, twice a week, at the time of day you think best, and defend it.

Ask about the flexibility that already exists. Alternative assessment, part-time routes, assessments spread across the term. Ask.

International students

Academic norms are local, and they are learnable. What counts as a strong argument, how much to quote, whether to challenge a lecturer — these vary by country and discipline. Learn them as anyone does: read the mark scheme, look at the top-marked example, ask your tutor, and observe how the strongest students in the seminar phrase their disagreement.

Language polish is a separate skill from ideas. If your first language is not English, keep a bank of academic phrases and reuse them: "the evidence suggests", "this challenges", "a plausible explanation is", "on balance". Build the sentence, then insert the content.

Do not lose the first weeks to administrative friction. Sort banking, phone, transport, GP, accommodation and visa documents early. These tasks compound.

Your questions are good. Asking for clarification of a reading, a citation or a term's meaning is what a good student does. Do it early rather than struggling for a fortnight.

Students with caring responsibilities or health conditions

Tell your department early, in writing, and say what support you need. The conversation is administrative, not emotional: "I have a caring commitment on Wednesday afternoons, so I would like the seminar recording and any reading deadline to fall earlier in the week."

Learn the adjustments route. Disability support, mental health advisors, learning support, alternative assessment, deadline extensions. You do not have to use them, but know they exist.

Disability is not a diagnosis you must justify to a lecturer. Use the formal route; it exists so you do not have to renegotiate every week.

Working with your lecturers and classmates

What lecturers actually do

Lecturers are not trying to catch you out. Most are doing three jobs at once: teaching, marking, and research/admin pressure. Their attention is scarce, so your approach decides whether you get it.

What gets a good response: a specific question, sent in good time, in an email that says who you are and which module. **What does not:** "Just checking in" with no question; a long apology for asking; messages at 11pm on a Sunday before a deadline.

How to ask a question well. One email, four lines:

1. Which module and which week or topic the question is about.
2. One sentence describing where you are stuck — "I cannot see why the author rejects the causal explanation on page 42".
3. Your attempt — even if it is wrong — so they can see your thinking.
4. One clear question — "Is the issue that the sample is unrepresentative, or that the measure is invalid?"

Office hours. Go if you can; if you cannot, email the same four lines. Prepare three questions before you go; you will usually get the first one answered.

Feedback. Read it before the next assignment. If a mark surprises you, ask with the criteria in mind: "I do not see where I met the criterion on analysis — can you point me to it?" Much better than "why did I get 58?"

The lecture. If you miss one, get the recording and the slides, then ask one question about it. Using a missed lecture as an excuse to skip the material is obvious to everyone.

Lecturers are not obstacles to be managed. They are the fastest route to the thing you do not yet understand.

Working with classmates

The people in your seminar are the ones who will help you in week eleven. This is logistics, not platitude. The student with the good notes is usually the one who will share them before an exam, and the one who understands the brief is usually the one who will check your draft.

Be the person who asks one concrete question. One good question changes the discussion for everyone. Ask it clearly, then let others talk.

Turn a study group into a structure, not a friendship. Groups work when they have a fixed time, a host, an agenda and an end time.

Help without rescuing. Sharing your notes and explaining the argument is good. Doing their work for them is not.

Find three kinds of people. One ahead of you in the reading. One at your level. One in a different discipline — where most good ideas come from.

Seminar and tutorial technique

Before: read for 30 minutes, write the argument in one sentence, prepare one question, and be able to say what you agree with and what you are unsure about.

During: take notes on the discussion, not the slides. Look for the moment the discussion turns — that is where the interesting thing is.

After: three lines. What was the argument? What did I contribute? What do I still not understand?

Seminar moment	What to do	Why
Nobody has spoken for two minutes	Ask your prepared question, addressed to the lecturer	You break the silence once and it becomes easier for everyone
You disagree	"I wonder if that holds, because X seems to assume Y"	States the disagreement without personalising it
You have no idea what is being discussed	"Could you say more about how X relates to Y?"	Clarification reads as engagement
You disagree with the reading	Bring the reading's own words: "On page 12 the author says ..."	Evidence beats opinion

How to ask for feedback without looking weak. The rule is **specificity is strength**. "Do you think this essay is good?" gets you nothing. "Does my second section do what the criterion on analysis asks, or does it need to link back to my thesis?" produces a usable answer in two minutes.

Managing group work

Group work fails on four things: unclear roles, late communication, unequal contribution, and no shared deadline.

1. **Set roles in the first meeting.** Writer, editor, researcher, coordinator. Rotate if the project runs longer than a month.
2. **Use one shared document from day one.** Not email attachments. One live document everyone can edit, with names on sections.
3. **Set a meeting rhythm in week one.** Same slot each week, 45 minutes, agenda circulated 24 hours ahead.
4. **Make contributions visible.** A shared task list with names against items. Social pressure does the work goodwill will not.
5. **Write the handover note.** If someone drops out, the work does not collapse with them.

Group work is not friendship and it is not friendship-testing. It is a small project with a deadline. Treat it like one.

The first 30 days, day by day

A concrete plan. Follow this and you will be ahead of most of your cohort by the end of the month — not because it is demanding, but because it is complete.

Day	Do this	Time	Output
1	Register, activate email, get library card, photograph the calendar	3 hrs	Calendar photographed; email live
2	Find your study room; set up timetable blocks	90 min	4 protected blocks booked
3	Download every item on the reading list. Start a deadline register	2 hrs	Reading list downloaded; register started
4	First lecture. Do the 10-minute post-lecture note. Prepare one question for next time	2 hrs	Notes + 1 question per module
5	Book the weekly review and Sunday catch-up; build your notes folder	45 min	Calendar entries + folder
6	Read one section of the first item. Write three summary lines	60 min	3 lines per reading, in your own words
7	Read 30 pages of a second item. Find a classmate to sit with on Thursday	90 min	A study companion identified
8	Make your first in-class question in a seminar. Write what you contributed	60 min	1 question asked
9	Weekly review: 25 min note cleaning, update register, plan	60 min	Weekly overview sheet
10	Read and prepare for Wednesday's and Thursday's sessions	90 min	Preparation done
11	Go to an office hour, or email a lecturer one specific question	45 min	A contact made, a question asked
12	Find the mark scheme and rubric for the first assignment	30 min	Rubric saved
13	Do one past paper or problem set from a previous year, timed	2 hrs	Practice attempt, self-marked
14	Apply for one fund, or set up the free software and support services you need	45 min	One application submitted
15	Mid-month check: compare planned vs actual hours; shrink the timetable 30% if you keep missing	45 min	A timetable you keep
16	Read the next item on the list. Start the permanent notes file for that module	90 min	Permanent note created
17	Group work meeting #1: set roles, agree the shared doc, set the next meeting	60 min	Roles + meeting rhythm agreed
18	Write a 300-word summary of one reading in your own words	60 min	Summary written
19	Repeat the weekly review. Update the deadline register	60 min	Register current
20	Visit the library: find the books, study spaces, desk hours	45 min	Library contact known
21	Draft an outline for the first assignment, using the rubric headings as the structure	90 min	Outline draft

Day	Do this	Time	Output
22	Attempt problem set 1 properly, timed, with no notes	90 min	Problem set attempted
23	Mark your own problem set against the solutions. List every topic you got wrong	45 min	Error list
24	Re-do the problems you got wrong, without looking at the solutions first	60 min	Gaps closed
25	Build your free resource shelf: the open textbook, the module page, the reading list, the best notes	30 min	One folder, indexed
26	Learn the citation style your course uses; set up a reference manager	60 min	One correctly formatted reference list started
27	Turn the outline into a first draft of 500 words. Do not polish it	90 min	500 words drafted
28	Send your draft to one classmate with the mark scheme. Ask for a check against the criteria	30 min	Peer check requested
29	Final review: hours worked, reading done, contacts made, gaps	90 min	Honest monthly picture
30	Make the term plan: what must happen in each of the next 8 weeks	60 min	A term map with dates

Total structured time across the 30 days: roughly 32 hours. Spread over a month that is about eight hours a week — a realistic floor that leaves room for a social life, part-time work and the surprises university delivers.

Thirty days is not long, but it is enough to build every habit the rest of the term depends on.

The month-one check

Ask yourself these five questions on day 30. Answer honestly.

1. **Do I know what each module expects, and when it is due?**
2. **Do I have a timetable I have actually kept for three weeks?**
3. **Have I asked at least one lecturer a real question?**
4. **Do I have a set of notes I could revise from in February?**
5. **Do I know three classmates' names and two of their phone numbers?**

If the answer to three of those is no, the month has not worked, and the fix is not more effort — it is a smaller plan. Cut your targets in half and keep the habits. Halved targets that survive beat ambitious targets that do not.

Common mistakes and how to get out of them

Each mistake below is common, specific and reversible. The fix is short because the mistake is simple.

1. Treating the first week as a study sprint

What it looks like: you cram in week one, exhaust yourself, and arrive at week two unable to start. **Getting out:** prioritise setup over content. Do 60 per cent of the first reading item, not 100 per cent of five. Your timetable and deadline register are worth more in week one than any notes.

2. Choosing a timetable you would like rather than one you can keep

What it looks like: 35 hours a week, colour-coded, abandoned by week three. **Getting out:** schedule 15 hours, keep them three weeks, then add. A 15-hour timetable you keep beats a 35-hour one you abandon.

3. Rereading notes instead of retrieving

What it looks like: three passes over your notes before an exam, and you still freeze on the paper. **Getting out:** blank page, timer, write what you remember, then check. Every topic, every time. Uncomfortable for two weeks, then it works.

4. Note-taking as transcription

What it looks like: notes full of the lecturer's sentences, unusable in revision. **Getting out:** the three-line summary at the end of every session. You have time for three lines and a question.

5. Avoiding the tutor, the lecturer, the office

What it looks like: you are three weeks behind and you have not told anyone. **Getting out:** send one email this week with a specific question. One. It will go fine, and it is the moment the situation changes shape.

6. Missing the reading week, or treating it as a holiday

What it looks like: you plan to revise in reading week and revise nothing, because you are tired. **Getting out:** book revision sessions in reading week in advance, in the calendar, before term ends. Treat it as a normal teaching week with lighter content.

7. Doing nothing about a failed or missing assignment

What it looks like: you missed a deadline, decided it is over, and now avoid the module. **Getting out:** email the lecturer today and include the resubmission or extension question. Most systems have a route. Asking costs one email; not asking costs the module.

8. Ignoring admin

What it looks like: your bursary application or compulsory training is overdue, and you find out when it is too late. **Getting out:** a 20-minute admin block every Sunday, right after your review. Set a recurring reminder.

9. Working at the wrong times

What it looks like: 11pm to 1am sessions producing less than two hours of real work. **Getting out:** move one 90-minute block to your best hours, even if it means waking earlier. Protect it like a lecture. Drop the late sessions — they cost you sleep, and sleep is when reading consolidates.

10. Doing no writing all term

What it looks like: you have never written 500 words of academic prose and now the essay is due. **Getting out:** write 300 words a week from week one. Notes count. Summaries count. By week twelve you will have 3,600 words of practice and the essay is not a cold start.

The one-line summary of all ten

Every one of these is a systems problem, not a character problem, and systems problems are fixed one thing at a time. Pick the biggest one. Change it this week. Then look again.

The goal is not to be a perfect student. It is to be a student who is never quietly out of control.

Final checklist

Print this or copy it into a note. Tick as you go.

Week one

- ☐ University email activated and notifications on
- ☐ VLE signed in, notifications on, module pages bookmarked
- ☐ Academic calendar photographed, including reading week and exam dates
- ☐ Deadline register started, with week numbers
- ☐ Reading list downloaded for every module
- ☐ Four study blocks in the calendar, same time every week
- ☐ Sunday review block (60 min) and Sunday catch-up block (2 hrs) in the calendar
- ☐ Study room identified — on campus or at home
- ☐ Three names in your phone: lecturer or module leader, admin contact, classmate
- ☐ Library card active, borrowing record checked

Weeks two to four

- ☐ Weekly review run every Sunday (25 min of note cleaning, 60 min of planning)
- ☐ One question prepared for every session
- ☐ Office hour attended, or one email sent to a lecturer
- ☐ Personal tutor booked for a first meeting
- ☐ Mark schemes and rubrics located for every assessment
- ☐ Extension process understood, before you need it
- ☐ Referencing style and reference manager set up
- ☐ One piece of work marked by a human
- ☐ Hardship fund, bursary or travel support applied for, if eligible
- ☐ Free university software accessed instead of bought
- ☐ GP registered; crisis contacts saved in your phone

End of month one

- ☐ Know what every module expects and when it is due
- ☐ Timetable kept for three consecutive weeks — adjust it down if not
- ☐ At least one lecturer interaction beyond the classroom
- ☐ Three classmates' names and two phone numbers
- ☐ One 500-word piece of writing drafted
- ☐ Term map made: what happens in each of the next 8 weeks
- ☐ Month-one check answered honestly

If you only do five things this month

1. Keep a Sunday review, every week, for four weeks.
2. Read before every session, twenty minutes minimum.
3. Ask one question per session and log it.
4. Build a timetable of 15 hours and defend it.
5. Write something every week, even if it is notes.

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You have 30 days. Build the machine. The work gets easier once the machine runs.

out this guide

st month of university decides how the rest of the term goes. This guide walks through what actually happens in week c
read and take notes, how to build a timetable you will keep, what to do when you fall behind, and how to revise prop
vers money, admin, and the specific adjustments that first-generation, mature and international students need.

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