How is study in HE different?

Tips to help you prepare for higher education study

You might be thinking, "Okay, I’ve finished with A-levels or BTEC, now on to something new!" But studying in higher education won’t be a completely new thing. On the other hand, it won’t be more of the same either. Rather it can be helpful to think of your previous studies as a preparation for higher education that you will need to build on and develop.

You are likely to be doing many of the same things. For instance:

- writing essays or other written assignments
- reading and making notes
- using references and compiling bibliographies
- listening to a teacher passing on knowledge of their subject

However, you will need to change and develop these practices to help you succeed at a higher level of academic study. Understanding how higher education is different will help you to be prepared for this.

So how is study at higher education level different from further education or A-level? What will your tutors expect from you, and how can you change your practices to meet those expectations?

More understanding, less describing

You will be used to learning about your subject, and communicating that knowledge in written assignments and presentations.

In higher education your tutors will not be looking for proof that you can describe what you know, but rather that you can put what you know to work: to demonstrate your understanding and make your knowledge meaningful. That will mean knowing the major issues and debates and being able to show what your knowledge can tell us about them.

Being rigorous and critical

Academic rigour means checking and testing information to assess whether it is free of errors and is backed by accurate and appropriate evidence. It needs to be strong so that it can support your arguments - like making sure foundations will hold a building up.

You will be used to looking for ‘facts’ to include in your assignments: identifying something as a fact means that you have already (whether consciously or unconsciously) considered whether it is correct.

In higher education you need to consider that people have different ideas about what makes something ‘correct’. You will be expected to compare and test these versions, and consider the contexts that might make them different.

Proving your points

Whether you are writing about someone else’s ideas or your own, you will be expected to support the points you wish to make with evidence, perhaps from your own primary research or observations, or...
from your reading. When this evidence is taken from someone else's work (a book, journal article or website, for instance), you need to provide a reference or citation to show the source.

**You will be used to** finding evidence in sources provided by your teacher or tutor and citing them according to a particular system (perhaps in footnotes).

**In higher education** you will be expected to find and evaluate your own sources of evidence, and make sure that they are cited correctly according to the preferred style for your department or discipline. Getting these exactly right seems trivial, but is actually another way that you demonstrate academic rigour in your work.

### Fewer contact hours

**You will be used to** having the potential for a considerable amount of direct contact with your course tutor, probably as part of a relatively small group.

**In higher education** you may find that there are more than a hundred students in a lecture theatre, with different lecturers each week, for only a couple of hours a week - and there may be little access to them outside of this time. Even if you are in a smaller group, you will mostly be expected to get on with study without a lot of direct contact with your tutor.

This is because learning at higher education level is conceived as more than just a one-way stream of information from tutor to student. You will be making your own knowledge from a combination of teaching, discussion with tutors and other students in seminars, independent reading and research and lots of thinking!

### Motivating yourself and being committed

Studying in higher education is a choice that you make. As your choice, you will be expected to be self-motivated and committed to your studies.

**You will be used to** being reminded by your tutor or teacher when you have an assignment due, or told by them how to prioritise your workload.

**In higher education** although you are likely to have a named 'personal' tutor who has an oversight of your activities, they will expect you to organise your own workload and keep on top of your commitments.

However that doesn’t mean that there isn’t plenty of support available, both from your tutor and from other people in your institution. It’s a good idea to get familiar with the sources of information and support that are available as soon as possible, so you have them when you need them.

### Think for yourself!

**You will be used to** asking questions - if you weren’t curious about the world, you wouldn’t want to study for a degree!

**In higher education** you will be expected to question everything. That includes everything you read, and even what your tutors tell you. That doesn’t mean you need to question your tutors directly, but you will be expected to ask yourself what you think about things, and then to go one step further and work out what it is that is making you think it. Never just accept what you’re told - always think for yourself!