**Thriving in Higher Education: Lee’s Top Ten Tips**

**1. Approach your studies like a full-time job**

**2. Manage your workload and timetable**

**3. Put that laptop (tablet, phone…) away!**

**4. Adopt a sceptical outlook: don’t accept claims based on authority (including us)**

**5. Do attend lectures, but see them as broad introductions to a topic, nothing more**

**6. Always prepare for your seminars**

**7. Participate actively in seminars**

**8. Writing at university: always argue**

**9. Understand and make use of your feedback**

**10. Focus on your success, not your grades**

**Thriving in Higher Education: Additional Resources**

**Time Management**

<https://help.open.ac.uk/time-management-skills>

**Reading and Note-Making**

<http://www.learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/reading>

**Getting the Most out of Lectures**

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/study/making-most-of-lectures>

**Making the Most of Seminars**

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/study/contributing-seminars-tutorials>

<https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/lectures/seminars>

**Getting More Help with Study Skills**

**Your tutors** are your first port of call. If you’re struggling on a particular module or don’t understand your feedback or how to implement changes, speak to your seminar tutor or module convenor. If you’re struggling across multiple modules, speak to your Advisor. Academic staff hold office hours every week for this very purpose.

**The Library** has a special “self-help” section containing many guides on how to thrive at university. It is housed at the front of the Learning Collection on the ground floor. I particularly recommend *How to Get a First*, written by QMUL historian Thomas Dixon. The Politics and International Relations subject librarian can also help you to use the library and other learning resources more effectively.

<https://www.library.qmul.ac.uk/subject-guides/politics-and-international-relations/>

**Learning Development** run a host of one-on-one and small-group tutorials, workshops and drop-ins, covering everything from reading and note-taking to referencing and writing to taking exams. There are also many self-access resources available.

<http://www.learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/writing-study-guidance>

<http://www.learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/self-access-resources>

**The Royal Literary Fellows** are professional authors on secondment to QMUL to help students become better writers.

<http://www.learningdevelopment.qmul.ac.uk/appointments-rlf-fellow>

**The Language Centre** runs “in-sessional” courses (i.e. mostly non-credit-bearing modules that run alongside your main programme of study) to provide more intensive and sustained training. These are particularly useful if you are struggling with your studies or finding it hard to adapt to university life in the UK. They cover a host of areas including engaging critically with writing, structuring arguments and avoiding plagiarism, improving your written and spoken English, and so on. There are also modules that have been developed specifically to support SPIR students.

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/sllf/language-centre/in-sessionals/>

**Why Students Should Ditch Electronic Devices When Preparing for, and During, Class**

Lee Jones

There is extensive anecdotal evidence of the negative impact of the use of laptops, tablets and smartphones in lectures and seminars, particularly in terms of students’ engagement with the material and one another (e.g. Yamamoto 2007: 485-93; Doubek 2016; Holstead 2017). In class, electronic devices are very distracting, limiting student engagement, and also make it difficult for tutors to gauge student levels of interest and understanding, particularly in lectures (Yamamoto 2007: 510). For related reasons, there is also a growing backlash against the use of PowerPoint in lectures (Sorensen 2015).

However, there is now also extensive *scientific* evidence that – despite a growing mania for e-learning – technology use has no appreciable positive impact on student learning and indeed actually damages it.

* There is mounting scientific evidence that the use of these devices – coupled with the internet – are affecting young people’s brain structure. This harms young people’s ability to concentrate and to process information. Particularly when reading, it leads to more superficial engagement with the text – the opposite of what higher education requires (Carr 2011). These devices are also linked to the mounting mental health crisis among young people (Twenge forthcoming; Twenge and Campbell 2019, 2018; Twenge et al. 2018a, b).
* A global OECD (2015) study found that educational systems that had invested heavily in information technology showed “no noticeable improvement” in test scores. The best performing systems had been “very cautious about using technology”, while, across the board, “Those students who use tablets and computers very often tend to do worse than those who use them moderately” (Coughlan 2015). This mirrors many existing academic studies (see Patterson and Patterson 2017: 2-3).
* Several studies have shown that students frequently use portable devices in the classroom for non-academic purposes and this is related to diminished learning (Hembrooke and Gay 2003; Junco 2012; Kraushaar and Novak, 2010; Risko et al. 2013; Rosen et al. 2011; Sana et al. 2013; Wood et al. 2012). This finding holds regardless of intellectual ability (Fried 2008; Jacobsen and Forste 2011; Ravizza et al. 2014, 2017). Where the impact on neighbouring students is also measured, a similarly negative effect is found (Fried 2008; Sana et al. 2013).
* Moreover, a growing number of studies show that even the use of portable devices for *academic* purposes have a negative impact on learning.
	+ A systematic review of the research base finds that reading on paper leads to better comprehension for anything longer than a page (Singer and Alexander 2017a). Laboratory tests found that, while students expressed a preference for reading on the screen, their recall, comprehension and detailed understanding of specific points were all superior when reading printed text (Singer and Alexander 2017b).
	+ Wurst et al. (2008), comparing two cohorts with and without laptops, found that the introduction of laptop computers inhibited students’ construction of their own meanings of material, did not increase attainment, and decreased student satisfaction.
	+ Ravizza et al. (2017) directly monitored students’ use of laptops during classes. They found that non-academic internet usage was inversely related to final test scores, regardless of levels of interest, motivation or intelligence, while academic internet usage did not increase performance.
	+ Mueller and Oppenheimer’s (2014) randomised control study found that students who took notes by hand, rather than on a portable device, consistently displayed far better understanding and recall of lecture content. This was ascribed to the tendency of laptop users to attempt to transcribe content verbatim, rather than processing the content and picking out key points (even when they were told not to). Similar results were found by Aguilar-Roca et al. (2012).
	+ Carter et al.’s (2017) randomised control study found that students in classes that permitted computer use performed 0.18 standard deviations worse than students in classes prohibiting their use.
	+ Patterson and Patterson’s (2017) large-scale, quasi-experimental study found that classroom laptop use “directly worsens academic outcomes”, decreasing course grades by 3.5 to 9 percentage points, with a particularly strong impact among male and low-performing students.
* Accordingly, there is growing support for the banning of laptops in the university classroom, particularly in the United States, where academics have greater policy control over their individual classrooms (see Yamamoto 2007: 483-5). Academics experimenting with such bans are reporting positive effects (e.g. Yamamoto 2007; Doubek 2016; Holstead 2017). For example, Holstead (2017) reports higher test scores and 52 percent of her students reported paying greater attention in class. Others have reported greater classroom discussion (Yamamoto 2007: 509, n.156). Yamamoto (2007: 511-13) reports that a large majority of his students favoured the ban in their end-of-term evaluations. This jibes with student feedback on modules in SPIR where laptop use was discouraged.
* Research also shows that the use of lecture capture is negative. Its introduction decreases attendance at lectures. Lecture attendance predicts higher attainment, and its reduction is not compensated for by students watching recorded lectures (Edwards and Clinton 2018).

**For these reasons, I recommend that, wherever possible, students:**

* **Do preparatory reading (and wherever possible, all reading) using printed material, not screens, taking notes using pen and paper.**
* **Take notes in class using pen and paper, leaving tablets, laptops and (especially) phones in bags or jackets.**

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**Lee’s Guide to Coursework**

**1. Reflect and act upon past feedback**

After your first assignment is graded, you’ll start to receive feedback. Don’t ignore it: make sure you understand it (ask your tutor if you don’t), and act to make the improvements suggested. If you don’t, our marking is a waste of time and you will struggle to improve – wasting your own time.

**2. Schedule your work over the semester and meet the deadline**

Having several assignments coming in on the same few days is inevitable, so start working early and pace yourself. Work backwards from deadlines and block out the time you need well in advance. This makes getting the books and articles you need much easier, and makes sloppy work – and assessment offences – less likely. Every year, we catch some people trying to throw work together at the last moment from online sources and commit plagiarism – please don’t let that someone be you. And don’t be that someone who’s let down at the last minute by technology: the university does *not* accept that as an excuse for late work. Save your work in multiple versions, consider using an online cloud backup like Dropbox, and submit your work on QMPlus well ahead of the deadline, not at the last possible moment. There is no penalty for handing work in early!

**3. Choose your coursework title and do some reading**

The titles are in the module handbook/ on QMPlus. Go for the one that most interests you (or bores you least) and you think you can answer. Then go read. Start with your notes – but never rely too heavily on lecture or seminar notes. Read some of the suggested books/ articles (in the module handbook) for that topic. You don’t have much space, so don’t overdo it by taking detailed notes on *everything*; be strategic.Read with your specific question in mind and hone in on what’s relevant. Focus on the main arguments (often found in the intro and conclusion, or in the abstract if it’s an article) and a few pertinent examples or facts and figures (from the main body).

**4. Answer the question set – and argue, argue, argue**

Practically every question you will face at university will invite you to make an *argument* in response, i.e. make a case to try to persuade the reader that your answer is correct. If you don’t, your essays will generally be poorer for it. So, as you read and take notes, always be thinking: what am I going to argue in response to this question? Even if you’re not 100% convinced yourself, an argumentative essay that at least acknowledges and rebuts counter-arguments will be better than one that just meanders vaguely around without any clear thesis. It will be even better than one that just rambles generally around the topic, regurgitates the lecture, and fails to answer the specific question set. Remember, your purpose is to make an argument in response to the question: it’s not to “slot in” points from the reading, just because you read them. Their points are not necessarily the points *you* want to make. Use arguments, evidence, examples, etc, that help to support *your* case and help refute alternatives. *Use* your reading, don’t simply repeat it.

**5. If you need help, visit your seminar tutor with a plan (not a draft!)**

Make an outline, bullet point plan of how you are planning to approach the essay, and ask your tutor during their office hours if this sounds OK. If they say yes, that doesn’t mean you will automatically get a great mark: it depends on how you execute your plan. A sculptor can show you a block of stone and describe the statue they plan to carve, but it doesn’t mean they will produce a masterpiece.

**6. Make an argument that runs throughout the whole essay**

Many of you bad been badly trained at school in how to write arguments. Particularly in Britain, students are often told to write something like “on the one hand *x*; on the other hand, *y*; ultimately I think *z*.” While motivated by a correct desire to address all possible perspectives and be “balanced”, most university tutors find this makes for a poor essay. Why? Because such essays (a) generally fail to lay out their argument at the beginning, (b) don’t sustain a clear argument throughout, tending instead to flip back and forth between contradictory perspectives, and (c) leave all the work of persuading the reader that *z* is correct to the very end – often the last paragraph – when it’s far too late, and *z* is most often stated as mere opinion. Far better, then, to announce at the outset, in your introduction, that your argument is *z*, then show why, explaining that *x* and *y* are alternative answers, but are wrong/ limited in some way, and providing the reasons why *z* is right; you have therefore led the reader to your conclusion all the way along. You’ve also dealt with contrary arguments, but made your own consistently throughout.

**7. Structure your argument clearly**

This approach suggests a clear *structure* i.e. a logical and coherent sequence of points. Plan your essay this way. Your introduction should *not* be a general background to the topic (as often suggested at school); it should give your answer to the question and describe the sequence of points you will use to persuade the reader of your case – it should be your essay in a nutshell. Each paragraph should then develop one key step in this sequence of points. Begin each paragraph with a *topic sentence*, which communicates clearly to the reader which point that paragraph develops (just reading the topic sentences should give the reader a clear sense of your overall argument). Then develop that point in the paragraph, and move on. Don’t deal with multiple big points in a single paragraph, and don’t return to the same point again. This is all much easier if you plan your essay carefully. When you finish the essay, go back over it and make sure the structure and argument match what you said in your intro. If it doesn’t, you’ll need to revise the intro or the body of your text.

**8. Write plainly and communicate clearly**

Many students think they should write complicated prose, using lots of fancy words, to show they are smart. Wrong. The purpose of writing is to communicate. Convoluted sentences, flowery prose, and jargon (especially when used incorrectly, which is common) are barriers to communication. Tutors prize clarity, simplicity, and direct language, not fine-sounding waffle. Follow George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language”: https://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e\_polit. His advice on cutting words is also really helpful for keeping to your word limits. If you’re uncertain, swap with a friend and ask them to read it out: does it make sense? Do, of course, check your spelling, grammar and punctuation – basic errors profoundly irritate most markers. If you’re still confusing its and it’s at this stage, learn to punctuate – see Lynne Truss’s *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*.

**9. Quoting**

Use quotes sparingly. Unless it’s a killer quote, it’s better to use your own words and then provide a reference to who gave you the idea. Even if you do want to use one, ensure that it adds value to your prose rather than repeating it – and run it naturally into your sentences (i.e. not ‘This is proved by a quotation from David Marquand: “...”’, but ‘As Marquand puts it, “...”’). Don’t just plonk quotations down and hope they do the argumentative work for you.

**10. Referencing and avoiding plagiarism**

This is easy to do, but most people don’t do it right. Just apply a bit of effort to learn how to do this correctly. There’s a detailed “Coursework Formatting and Referencing Guide” at https://qmplus.qmul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1315. Use it!

**11. Writing your conclusion**

Sum up (briefly) and draw the threads together, but don’t repeat yourself at length: especially if the essay is short, the marker will remember what you’ve just said and, if you’ve structured the essay correctly, your conclusion will already be obvious as you’ll have been arguing towards it the whole time. A conclusion can therefore be short. You could also use it to bring up something interesting, paradoxical, quirky, that remains to be seen or needs further exploration/research. This just shows that you are thinking beyond the question and could have done even more – if only the word limit hadn’t constrained your genius and your enthusiasm!

**12. Proof-read before you submit**

The temptation to submit the second after you finish the final word may be strong. Resist. Check your work to ensure you’ve argued what you promised you would in the introduction, that the topic sentences elaborate that argument, and that the content of each paragraph maps onto their respective topic sentences. And correct your spelling, punctuation and grammar. If you don’t, it tells the marker you don’t care about your work.

**12. Complete the coversheet in full**

Save at least 30 mins to reflect properly on your work and complete the cover sheet, which is designed to help you understand the difference between good and bad work, and do more of the former. It will also help the marker focus their feedback where you need it most.

**13. Submit on time – and always submit *something***

For every day/ part day you submit your work late, you lose 5 marks; after 7 days, you get zero. Even if your work is one minute late, you lose 5 marks. So, submit your work on time! And even if you’re worried your work is weak, submit it anyway. 40 marks is better than zero marks. A surprising number of students fail their modules/ degrees simply because they didn’t submit work – when, if they had, they would at least have passed. If you really have severe personal difficulties, such that it impacts your ability to do your work on time, you must apply for extenuating circumstances (see the SPIR Undergraduate Info Zone).

**13. Act on feedback**

This loops back to point 1 – but it’s a crucial phase, which many people ignore. If you’ve done less well than expected, or even if you are pleased with your mark, read and understand the feedback so you know how to improve in future. If you don’t understand the feedback, see your tutor. They will *never* change grades at your request but they will *always* explain why they gave the grade they did and help you understand how to improve.