STEPPING UP FROM A-LEVEL TO UNI: A STUDY SKILLS GUIDE
The Student Room

Liverpool Hope University has a vibrant community and a history extending over 170 years. As one of Britain’s smaller universities, we value the individual, offering a diverse range of undergraduate, postgraduate and research opportunities through our faculties. The university is ranked top three in the UK for teaching quality and top five for student experience by The Sunday Times Good University Guide 2018, and was recently awarded gold status in the government’s Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Students at Liverpool Hope have the best of both worlds - living and studying on friendly, beautiful campuses, in one of Europe’s most exciting cities.
STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY: HOW TO GET READY

Starting university is an exciting time, whether you’re moving into halls, taking the first steps towards your dream career or looking forward to new experiences. Making the transition from studying in the classroom to learning independently can take some getting used to, but this guide is here to help. From sourcing information, to academic writing and referencing, making the leap into degree-level study can seem quite daunting at first. However, universities have a host of resources available to make the transition as easy as possible. Here at Liverpool Hope, we pride ourselves on the support we offer our students, which is why we’re proud to be teaming up with The Student Room to bring you tips and advice on starting your university experience.

Throughout this guide, we’ll explore the different types of study skills you’ll need to develop, and some quick and easy ways to master these. Within the following chapters, we’ll cover topics including independent learning, referencing, working with others, making notes, handling stress, and preparing for revision and exams.

You’ll also hear from Liverpool Hope students who share their first-hand experiences and top tips on how to develop your study skills, while our academics provide advice on making the most of the resources available. By the end of this guide, we hope you’ll feel more confident about what to expect when you arrive at university, and ready to take on the next challenge in your educational journey.

- Liverpool Hope University
LEARNING INDEPENDENTLY

MAKING THE STEP UP TO UNIVERSITY-LEVEL LEARNING

University is all about independence, and that includes your learning style. Instead of being chased for your work (as you might have been at school), you’ll be expected to motivate and organise yourself. After all, you’ve chosen to study your subject at degree level, so it follows that you’re going to be motivated to learn. This is good news: essentially uni = freedom! You decide your own priorities; you work in the way that’s best for you. If you find this challenging (and it definitely can be) then help is at hand. Universities have study support teams and academic staff who are there to help you step up to degree-level study.

Quick tips for learning independently

• Invest in some decent stationery for organising your paperwork

• Use a calendar app and check your emails, texts and other comms regularly so that you always know what is going on

• Study the course information carefully so that you don’t invest in expensive stuff you don’t need. But make sure you’ve got what is essential. If in doubt, ask

• You can study whenever and wherever you like now you’re at uni. Try different locations and times for study until you find those that suit you best

• Keep your motivation up by breaking your studying into suitable chunks
Independent study is a key part of success at uni. Here, they just give you the bare bones of the subject and expect you to go away and fill in the gaps yourself. I definitely study more now than I did at school.

- hermitthefrog, The Student Room

University’s a whole different experience. You’ll have to learn how to be independent and learn independently. Go in being positive and determined [and] you’ll do fine!

- fairplaytoyou, The Student Room

I enjoy going to the library and actually doing independent reading on the topics because I’m studying something I’m interested in.

- Ruffiiio, The Student Room

I’ve always been better at independent study at home. It’s nice to just be in for around 15 hours a week and get on with your own things at home. It’s a nice challenge as well because you’re not told all the answers.

- WhamBamJam, The Student Room
Having a study partner is always helpful! Use the guidance that is provided by the university and work from it together to gather the correct information that’s needed.

- Niamh Gallagher, 19, Primary Education with QTS, Liverpool Hope University

EXPERTS SAY...

One of the biggest changes for some students is the amount of independence you are given at university compared to school or college, especially when it comes to learning. You need to work with your tutors to understand how to get organised, manage your own time, and think. Many students adapt to this very quickly, while for others it is more of a challenge. The good news is that there is plenty of support to help you adjust to these new expectations and to succeed as an independent adult learner.

- Dr Penny Haughan,
  Pro Vice-Chancellor Student Life and Learning,
  Liverpool Hope University
MAKING NOTES

HOW TO MAKE NOTES AND WHY YOU SHOULD BOTHER

Unless you’re equipped with supernatural powers of memory, you’re going to need to keep notes throughout your course to record details of all your reading and research. You might make bulleted lists, spider diagrams, flow diagrams…try out the different approaches and go with whatever suits the topic and works for you. Remember that taking notes and making notes can be quite different things. Taking notes is something you do in a lecture, keeping up with the speed of delivery. Making notes is what you do when you read a text. Because you go at your own pace, you have more time and more control.

Quick tips on making notes

• Spend some time trying different styles of notes, to find out what works well for you

• Write up your notes soon after taking them, otherwise you will forget the details

• Keep your notes well organised, ready for writing assignments or revising for exams

• There are great apps and tools for making and organising digital notes

• It is important that you keep a record of where your notes are coming from; if you don’t it counts as plagiarism. Make sure you understand the rules around plagiarism and stick to them
All my lectures are on a Monday afternoon and evening, so I set aside a Tuesday between 8am-1pm to write up a good set of revision notes for each lecture. That leaves me with the rest of the week to focus on tutorial preparation, reading and coursework.

- GoingToBurst, The Student Room

We have lecture handouts but these only outline the issues, which the lecturer then fleshes out. Really good lecture notes can significantly reduce the reading one has to do for a topic, in my experience.

- Illiberal Liberal, The Student Room

I take my laptop to every lecture/seminar, and type as they talk. If you don’t have access to a laptop an A4 refill pad will do just as well.

- runforseven, The Student Room

If the lecturers put the notes or recording up online then note-taking isn’t necessary. If they don’t though then I would say it is. Unlike at A-level, there aren’t textbooks covering your exact syllabus.

- GoingToBurst, The Student Room
I always find it useful to record lectures, so that I can listen back to them rather than writing notes. It means I’m paying attention and listening to what people are telling me rather than writing. If I need to write stuff down I do it after, but the PowerPoints from lectures are usually brilliant as notes.

- Rosemary Booth, 19, Disability Studies in Education, Liverpool Hope University

EXPERTS SAY...

Taking effective and useable notes in lectures and seminars, and making high quality notes from reading and researching, are key skills for success at university. If you can’t do this already, spend some time learning how as soon as you can. Try some of the excellent online resources that are available. It will make your learning more effective from day one.

- Emilee Morrallis, Academic Study Skills Mentor, Liverpool Hope University
READING SKILLS

HOW TO HACK YOUR WAY THROUGH DENSE TEXTS AND LONG READING LISTS

Most uni courses require a lot of reading – you’ll be given lists of books, journals, academic papers, web pages, presentations, newspapers and scripts to work through. To get on top of all this information, you’ll need to think about what you’re reading, developing your own thoughts and ideas as you go. You don’t have to agree with everything you read; building skills in judging credibility, impartiality and accuracy will be an important part of your studies. Critical thinking is what really matters, which means asking questions as you read. Work on strategies to help you assess texts quickly; this can have a big effect on your progress and help you manage your workload.

Quick tips on improving your reading skills

• The technical language used by academics can be frustrating. It’s quite normal to find this challenging at the start

• Learn how to skim and scan texts to get a rough idea of the content. For a quick overview, read the summary or synopsis and then jump to the conclusion

• Use a specialist dictionary or get hold of an introductory guide to the topic and read that first

• Use online tools to help identify unreliable sources

• Library staff can help you discover what you need to be reading and how to access it
If you find it hard to read constantly the best thing to do is to break it up into chunks, gradually increasing the amount you read every day. Start off aiming to read a paragraph of text a day, increasing it to a page a day, then a chapter a day.

- username2981082, The Student Room

First, read the introduction and conclusion of a book to see the main arguments laid out. Often the introduction will explain the layout of the rest of the chapters, so you might then be able to hone in on a few specific ones depending on the information you need.

- gutenberg, The Student Room

From my experience it is better to read everything they tell you to read each week for lectures and seminars. It will all be relevant to the discussion and exams and you need to stay on top of it.

- Puddles the Monkey, The Student Room

Just don’t read every single book or article word for word. Skim and scan. Look for things that are important and take notes (highlight, underline or write it on a separate page).

- LegallyMinded, The Student Room
When an assignment came up I would look at key words in the question or brief and would use this to find relevant information in textbooks by using the contents/index. This meant that I would only need to read a certain chapter of information that was necessary. I also adapted by printing off any articles that we were asked to read and highlighting the key info so that I could quickly refer back to it. The best place to go for reading quietly is probably the study pods in the library as you can be by yourself and not be distracted.”

- Eleanor Jones, 20, Primary Teaching (QTS) with Early Childhood’

EXPERTS SAY...

“Developing your reading skills is really important once you’re at university. You need to learn to read a broad range of sources in an academic way and expand your critical analysis skills. This is crucial at degree level.

- Susan Murray, Director of Library and Learning Spaces, Liverpool Hope University
HANDLING ESSAYS, REPORTS AND DISSERTATIONS

No matter which course you choose, you can expect to be doing a lot of writing. In academic literature, the style is often quite reserved and cautious. However, it is important for the writing to be appropriate to the task, so your style will probably vary between assignments. Essays are pieces of continuous writing, normally addressing a question, and they usually have the same ‘voice’ throughout. Reports are more structured documents with individual sections, and the voice might differ between the sections. Dissertations are longer pieces of writing which present some research work, and are normally produced over a longer time period. If you aren’t sure about styles and formats or how to structure your writing, there is plenty of support available at university.

Quick tips on improving your writing skills

- Allow enough time for each stage of the process - understanding the task and format, researching, planning, drafting, editing and rewriting
- Make sure your writing is objective and accurate
- Follow the rules and conventions about referencing
- Try to write in plain English, avoiding slang and jargon as much as possible
- Make use of the literacy advice and support available in the university and online
**STUDENTS SAY...**

“Keep practising writing essays. Show draft copies to people and ask for feedback on the writing style. Try to work out what kind of style you’re aiming for and work towards it. Identify what it is you don’t like about your own writing and try to change it.

- lindtasaurus, The Student Room

“When writing my dissertation, I was advised to write out all my headings, along with a brief idea of where I would go with it. That way, you have a structure planned out, as well as knowing what you want to talk about.

- tory88, The Student Room

“At my uni, we have optional library sessions and workshops that we can attend to assist with our study/research skills.

- annablagg, The Student Room

“University essays and assignments are very different from A-levels in terms of the degree of independent learning and the concepts that you cover, but this is why first year doesn’t usually count towards your degree classification. It’s meant to be a learning curve.

- Energy_Purple, The Student Room
Take advantage of writing mentors within your first year, as it will help you throughout your whole degree.

- Ami Williams, 23, Primary Teaching (QTS) with Early Childhood

EXPERTS SAY...

Writing in an appropriate style and format can be a challenge. There are conventions around academic writing that need to be observed, and what works for a report is not necessarily the same as for an essay. It’s really great to see students’ writing skills improve over the duration of the course, as they grow more confident.

- Associate Professor Sonja Tiernan,
  Head of Department of History and Politics,
  Liverpool Hope University
REFERENCING

WHY REFERENCING IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS YOU’LL LEARN AT UNI

In all the work you’ll do at university, it’s essential to reference your sources. This comes under the heading of ‘academic integrity’: it’s tied up with ideas of fairness, honesty and responsibility. It’s also how you avoid plagiarism so, yep, pretty important. Referencing can seem complex at first, and getting your head round it is made trickier because there are various different referencing systems, which present the information in different ways. The basics are simple, though. A citation is a short form of reference which you use in your text to indicate that a full reference is included in the bibliography (a list which normally sits at the end of the document). Footnotes are the small print you see at the bottom of some pages, and they can be used for referencing a source. You’ll be given advice on how to reference before you’re expected to start doing it.

Quick tips on referencing

• The Harvard referencing system is widely used, but there are others

• Take time to understand the university’s rules on referencing, and make sure you meet its expectations

• Get into the habit of recording details such as the author’s name, the title of the source, page numbers, URLs, date of the source, publisher and place of publication

• There are different kinds of referencing software which can organise your references into an easily manageable database. This can be really helpful for longer pieces of research

• Bibliographies and footnotes can be a handy guide to possible future reading when looking for new ideas
Check what referencing system your department uses (typically Harvard or Vancouver), or ask the lecturer who set the work what they prefer. Sometimes I’ve been told that they don’t mind provided it’s clear where your citations are and what you’re referencing.

- Manitude, The Student Room

Learning that you have to reference everything at university is like the day you found out Santa doesn’t exist!

- LavenderBlueSky88, The Student Room

I made sure all my references and points were complete before I started writing. Writing is by far the easiest part, and it flows much better if you aren’t stopping every second to write a reference.

- Inazuma, The Student Room

Referencing is a lot to do with accuracy and consistency and you are expected to learn how to do it in the first year.

- Klix88, The Student Room
I found referencing really difficult when I first started, but I found it really useful to have both a university-written guide and a faculty librarian who was so knowledgeable about my discipline and referencing. I was eventually really confident in referencing after making use of this support!

- Steven Walsh, 24, Early Childhood and Education, Liverpool Hope University

EXPERTS SAY...

For a lot of new students, proper referencing is not something they have had to do before – but it needs to be taken very seriously. We have clear guidelines that we require everyone to follow. It might seem a bit strange at first – but you’ll get the hang of it very quickly, and if your own work gets published in future, you’ll be glad other people give you credit where it is due.

- Associate Professor Phil Bamber, Head of Department of Education Studies, Liverpool Hope University
HOW TO HANDLE GROUP WORK

You don’t always work on your own at uni – sometimes you’ll be presenting work as part of a group. Sharing ideas can be an effective and powerful way to learn, but it’s not always easy, particularly if it feels like some members of the group aren’t pulling their weight or there are disagreements. University staff are aware of these issues – they will be focused on helping all groups to work well together. And it’s worth the effort: employers love to hear about uni group work as it shows experience of working in a team.

Quick tips on group work

• Spend time together as a group so you get to know each other better
• Involve everyone in discussing the task and agreeing on specific tasks or roles
• Agree short-term and long-term deadlines and who will deliver what and by when
• Ensure every member of the group is aware of their responsibilities and is accountable
• Share information and knowledge throughout the project
STUDENTS SAY...

“My last university has done a lot of analysis of graduate requirements with employers. The ability to work in a group was highlighted as a key employment skill, so my uni has some level of group work in each year of all degrees.

- Klix88, The Student Room

“Group work can be a nightmare if there are people in your group who don’t do their equal share. On the other hand, the last group I was in went smoothly - everyone contributed their ideas and nobody slacked off. It was brilliant and we all got high marks. I think group work prepares you for life in general - sometimes you have to put up with things you’d rather not and you learn to compromise.

- SkinnyKat, The Student Room

“[Group work] helps you find ways to work with people you would never usually talk to. If everyone puts in the same amount of effort, things can get done quickly and easily. Teamwork is probably the most looked-for quality in work environments, so it pays to have some experience.

- InsideMyBrain, The Student Room
Exchange the notes with the others, form groups and study together. Be open and friendly and help others when they struggle to grasp some difficult concepts, as they will help you back with things you don’t understand.

- Klara Sharples, 43, Psychology, Liverpool Hope University

EXPERTS SAY...

Working well with other students is really important at degree level. It develops your ability to work in a team, to negotiate and plan effectively, and to take responsibility for your elements of shared activities. It tests your resilience and builds your self-confidence. Be prepared to share your learning experiences with other students who love the subject as much as you do!

- Ben Kirk, PhD student, Liverpool Hope University
MAKING PRESENTATIONS

PLANNING, PRESENTING AND GETTING OVER THOSE NERVES

You can expect to be doing a few presentations during your course, they often form part of your assessed work. Plenty of people get nervous about giving a presentation, but you can ease those nerves by being well-prepared and practising lots. During your planning, make sure you understand the objectives and structure your talk accordingly, with a clear beginning, middle and end. You’ll probably use slides, but try not to rely too heavily on what’s shown on screen and consider using other materials or activities to keep your audience focused. Try to anticipate the questions you might be asked and prepare some suitable answers.

Quick tips on making presentations

• PowerPoint isn’t the only presentation software – experiment with others to see which suits you best

• Make sure your slides/visuals are clear and simple and can be read from the back of the room

• Proofread your presentation and any handouts very carefully

• Talk about your slides/visuals – don’t read them out

• Be well prepared. Rehearse your presentation beforehand, including checking your timing
STUDENTS SAY...

“Very few of us are naturals when it comes to presentations, but they do get easier with time.”

- TheMoreILearn..., The Student Room

“All of my presentations have been in tutorials and seminars, so it’s been around 40 people that I’ve spoken in front of at most. I’ve never felt like they’re particularly high pressure. Half the time the only people paying attention are whoever’s marking you and a few really keen students.”

- mollyanne98, The Student Room

“During my first presentation I talked so much without breathing I had to take massive gulps and nearly passed out. I found a stress ball and put it into my pocket, I clenched it and let go through the whole thing and it seemed to take my mind off it.”

- Grace0792, The Student Room
Keep your presentation slides simple, so the content is mainly delivered by you speaking, and rehearse in front of family and friends so you feel more prepared. I used to use an empty classroom with friends to practice presenting in the classroom environment.

- Joshua Loveday, 25, Marketing and Media & Communication, Liverpool Hope University

EXPERTS SAY...

I love seeing and hearing students give presentations of their work and research. It gives me a real sense of them as individuals and members of a team, and it is a great way of finding out what they really know. I am often amazed by the quality of the best presentations. Usually these come from students who have taken on board the advice we give on the dos and don’ts in order to prepare something which is effective, interesting and insightful…and not too long!

- Jan Egerton, Head of Fine and Applied Art, Liverpool Hope University
HANDLING STRESS

HOW TO DEAL WITH STRESS AND WHAT TO DO IF IT GETS TOO MUCH

University life is busy. You’ll have plenty of academic work to do, and you’re going to be juggling this with a new lifestyle, new circle of friends and maybe a part-time job. Bottom line: like most students, you’re sometimes going to feel stressed. That’s not unusual and it’s not necessarily something to worry about. We need a certain level of stress to keep us motivated and focused. When stress starts affecting your ability to cope with day-to-day activities, that’s when it’s time to seek additional support. Universities run wellbeing services for students and can direct you to other places that can help. Look after yourself as well. Having a healthy diet, a good work-life balance, being active and sleeping well can all help to reduce stress.

Quick tips on dealing with stress

• Stay in contact with family and friends from home
• Get involved in community activities, have a social life, and make new connections
• Eat healthily and exercise regularly (it doesn’t need to be particularly intense or structured)
• Vary your routines and take an interest in new things
• Learn to be mindful
Most universities offer access to a confidential counselling service. Enquire at your student support centre. Speaking to someone is a great way to look at issues that you’re having, either with university or your personal life, and work with them to resolve them.

- Roving Fish, The Student Room

First of all, deep breathing exercises can be really helpful. I have anxiety so am well acquainted with stress, and deep breathing exercises are really helpful for me.

- Lishskiroyale, The Student Room

The biggest thing for me is recognising when I’m stressed, so I can try to deal with it. Once I have, I like doing mindless repetitive stuff that calms me down. Also things like online jigsaws can be great - someone recommended them to me on here a few years back.

- furryface12, The Student Room

What I have found most helpful for me while revising is to alternate between stints of revision and stints of doing something active and not cerebral (washing up, ironing, walk round the block, anything that doesn’t require thought).

- MartinF, The Student Room
Liverpool Hope’s men’s Gaelic football team has been my stress relief during my four years at university. You need to find something that you enjoy to take off the pressure. Whether it’s sport, friends, reading or going for a drink, whatever works for you, pursue it.

- Conor Boyle, 23, Primary Teaching (QTS) with History, Liverpool Hope University

Helping students to manage the various stresses of university life is one of my key roles. I work with a great team of staff including our counselling, learning support and residential life teams, to support students experiencing difficulties. A moderate amount of stress is to be expected and can be helpful in some situations, but when this starts to affect your everyday functioning, it is time to get some help. We welcome all students who require support to help them achieve a better balance in order to be more effective as learners.

- Josie Davies, Senior Mental Health Adviser, Liverpool Hope University
REVISION AND EXAMS

GETTING THROUGH ASSESSMENTS AT UNIVERSITY

At university, you’ll be building on the revision skills you’ve developed through school and college. Degree-level revision requires more than just a good memory; you’ll need to develop an understanding of your course content, as well as making sure you understand the exam and assessment criteria. All those notes you’ve been making will be key – use these to build your core revision resources. Group working and rewards can help you maintain motivation, and having a positive mindset towards the whole process can improve your revision and exam performance. There are great online resources for revision, and universities are likely to run revision sessions for major exams. As you revise, test your understanding by using past papers and mark schemes.

Quick tips on dealing with revision and exams

• Think positively about your exams and the revision process

• Use an online resource to create a flexible revision timetable, dividing your time into short productive chunks

• Experiment with a variety of methods – mind maps, revision cards, audio and video – and set up a study group

• Learn some simple techniques for improving your memory

• Give yourself small rewards when you have completed a revision task
Everyone has their own methods and you need to work yours out. Generally, stay on top of things, make your own notes, read around your lectures and other taught material and try past papers if you have access to them.

- Alleycat393, The Student Room

Always remember to take breaks, and when you finish revising give yourself a treat to keep yourself motivated. It’s amazing what a cup of hot chocolate can do.

- Kam Brar, The Student Room

I made loads of neat study notes, written as if I was explaining the concepts to someone else. They were the shrine I would centre my studying devotion around.

- ChaoticButterfly, The Student Room
Start revising in good time, don’t cram everything in as it will make you feel more stressed. I find creating A3 colourful spider diagrams with all the information I need and sticking them on my bedroom wall helps me a lot.

- Ami Williams, 23, Primary Teaching (QTS) with Early Childhood

EXPERTS SAY...

Revising and preparing for exams is something that you have probably been doing for many years, but maybe you never stopped to consider why or how it works. Understanding the real scope of revision, and reflecting on what you actually do, don’t do, and could be doing instead, can make a real difference to your performance. I encourage all of my students to spend time looking at the great resources that are available on revision, because I believe it really helps.

- Dr Clay Gransden, Lecturer in Marketing,
  Liverpool Hope University
WORK/LIFE BALANCE

MAKING TIME FOR EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS

Keeping the balance at uni really does matter. There is so much to do, so much to explore, that it can sometimes be easy to forget you’ve got lectures to attend and work to get on with. But spend all day every day with your nose in the books, and you not only risk burnout but will also miss out on all those other opportunities university has to offer. The sweet spot is somewhere between the two – getting deeply involved with your coursework while keeping space for socialising and downtime. We spoke to students at Liverpool Hope University to get their advice on managing a healthy work/life balance at uni.

EAT WELL

“I believe that having the right diet while at university is essential, in order to maintain a healthy body and healthy mind. From experience, it’s also a great way to socialise and make new friends – particularly if you eat in the main catering areas on campus.”

Marc Isherwood, 23, Sport & Physical Education and Education Studies

JOIN A CLUB OR SOCIETY

“I would definitely advise joining a club or society outside of your studies. While I thoroughly enjoyed the dance modules within my degree, I knew I wanted to keep active through another sport. I joined the cheerleading society - Hope Hurricanes. Despite having no experience at all, I was trained at a professional level and competed in various competitions. Not only did my fitness improve, but my confidence in performance soared too!”

Melissa Grindon, 23, Dance and English Language
PLAN RELAXATION TIME
“I find planning things really helpful. I will plan certain times to do things like see my friends, relax with a book or a film, go to societies and ring my family. I always feel like planning those things in at set times means I will definitely do them, and this helps me maintain a healthy and positive outlook. Talking to family regularly also really helps you not to feel homesick.”

Rosemary Booth, 19, Disability Studies in Education

GET A PART-TIME JOB
“You need balance and structure while you’re at university. After my first year, I was able to achieve these by juggling my studies with part-time on-campus work at Liverpool Hope. As well as helping financially, having other things to occupy myself with stopped me from becoming stressed about university work.”

Conor Boyle, 23, Primary Teaching (QTS) with History

GET OUT AND EXPLORE
“Getting out and exploring a new city is a great way to de-stress, but also might help you feel a bit more at home when moving away for the first time - there’s so much to do in Liverpool!”

Katherine Lang, 21, Childhood & Youth and Sociology

GET PLENTY OF SLEEP
“As I study primary education, I’ve found it is really important to find a good balance and take care of yourself, rather than focusing completely on the workload. I highly recommend sleep as a key factor in keeping on top of things, as being well-rested sets you up for a productive day.”

Niamh Gallagher, 19, Primary Education with QTS