

## *Survive and Thrive: Your First Term at University*

Academic Skills, Trent University (2018)

### Welcome to University

So, you've finally made it. Congratulations! Feeling excited? Nervous? Wondering what's ahead, how you'll do? University life can be exhilarating, nerve-wracking, confusing, illuminating, and, yes, sometimes boring. But no matter what happens, you will be forever changed by the experience.

You want to do well, right? Naturally. It's also natural to keep on doing what has worked for you in the past; after all, you have reached university because you learned the skills and habits that bring success in high school. But the game has changed, so you need to learn a new set of rules.

There is no formula for success at university or anywhere else. Just as you are unique, the experiences you will have, the problems you will encounter, and the solutions and methods that you will devise will also be uniquely yours. **Consider the strategies we suggest, and then figure out what works for you. Remember, there is no one "right" way to do anything – there are many ways.**

### What is University Anyways?

"University" is as much a state of mind as it is a place. When you become a university student, you do more than attend a

particular institution; you enter into the world of scholars, a world that engages many cultures and reaches through time. You will be engaging with an intellectual community that has deep roots, and just as you will build on the work of others, future scholars may one day build upon the work you do. This is serious business!

But it is also fun. University is the place where you finally get to learn about things that interest you. And, herein lies the first key to how you can survive and thrive: figure out what interests you and work on that. The best part is that by working on what interests you, you will be doing something that you really enjoy while you develop valuable skills like organization, research, analysis, and communication.

### How Does University Differ from High School?

University is a different world. The amount and type of work differ from that in high school, as do the pace, the purpose, and the style of your studies. These differences provide a wealth of opportunity but also a range of challenges.

### A Difference in Attitude: Independence and Responsibility

At university, you will be expected to manage your own affairs. No one will make you come to class or hand in your work. No one will check in on you to make sure that you stay on track or contact your parents to express concern. Instead, they will allow you to make your own decisions and to face the consequences of those decisions.

Therefore, you need to make decisions that are in your best interest. You are now responsible for your own education and your own life. There are many qualities that can help you to make good decisions about your education.

### Key Qualities for Success

#### *A Sense of Responsibility*

You have a responsibility to yourself. You must take control of your education, choosing the right courses, making the right decisions, and acting in a way that is in your own best interest.

#### *Self- Direction*

Your university education must be self-directed, the result of your choices, your abilities, and your desires. When you set the path of your education at university, you are more invested and committed to the work of learning.

#### *An Open Mind*

University will expose you to new ideas and ways of doing things. Consider these new approaches carefully and completely instead of dismissing them right away. The views of your professors, university staff, and fellow students are based on training, experience, and study; theirs are “informed opinions.” This is what you have come to university to get: the training that is needed for you to develop educated and informed views. And you will – if you keep an open mind.

#### *Openness to Taking Risks and Making Mistakes*

Don't be afraid of making errors; just be sure to learn from them. Instead of thinking solely about marks, concentrate on doing your very best work; the marks will follow.

#### *Persistence*

In university, you will encounter challenges and sometimes obstacles. Keep trying, keep learning, and keep asking questions, even when you feel like giving up. You will find that reward comes from hard work and dedication.

#### *A Difference in Time: Managing Your Time and Workload*

Without a doubt, you will spend less time in class and yet do more work in university than you did in high school.

#### *The First Year Workload*

On average, a Trent first year student

- Spends 15-20 hours a week in lectures, seminars, or labs
- Is assigned approximately 250 pages of reading per week
- Spends approximately 15 hours per week completing weekly reading, online assignments, or problem sets
- Writes up to 60 pages per term for which he or she completes additional reading and research

In high school, you probably completed many small assignments throughout the year. In university, you will find that the work tends to be less evenly distributed throughout the term. This means that you may not have any assignments

due until the end of term, but then you will have five papers due on the same day (plus exams!).

It is important to organize your time so that you can get your class work done, get your assignments done (on time!), and have a life too. This is achievable with good planning and time management skills (more on this later).

### How Can I Survive and Thrive?

In this guide we offer practical advice to help you adapt to the different academic environment that you will find at university.

#### Before You Arrive

- ✓ Read all communications from the university. Set up your email for regular access.
- ✓ Attend an orientation day for new students.
- ✓ Review the academic calendar and register for classes.
- ✓ Get a feel for university expectation and find resources to support your reading, writing, and thinking skills.

[Read more](#)

#### The First Week

- ✓ Review your courses and understand the requirements for each. Make any necessary course changes soon.
- ✓ Explore the campus and learn about supports.
- ✓ Explore the library; complete the online tutorials.
- ✓ Establish a workspace that will work for you.

[Read more](#)

#### The First Month

- ✓ Organize your courses; read your course outlines regularly.
- ✓ Make a time management plan for the term so that you can manage your time; include both your school work and your life.
- ✓ Get to class; establish good habits right away. Speak up; don't be intimidated by anyone; persevere.
- ✓ Practice your listening and your notetaking skills; find a notetaking system that works for you.
- ✓ Develop reading, math, and writing skills to meet expectations for critical thinking and analysis.

[Read more](#)

#### The First Term

- ✓ Review lecture and reading notes each week
- ✓ Review and modify your study habits and time management plan as needed
- ✓ Seek help if you need it
- ✓ Persevere if you face set-backs and challenges!

[Read more](#)

## What to Do Before You Arrive

### Connect with the University

Read all communications from the university carefully. You will receive information about registering for courses, paying fees, housing, orientation programming, and more. It's a good idea to sync your Trent email to your phone and log on to the myTrent portal regularly so you don't miss any important information. The university also posts information on social media channels, so be sure to follow them to find out about interesting events and important deadlines.

Try to attend a [Summer Orientation](#) session to learn about choosing courses, to begin preparing for university, and to see the campus with a new perspective.

### Become Familiar with the Course Calendar

The [academic calendar](#) is an important document for all students; it provides details about university and departmental degree requirements, important dates (for fee payment, adding and dropping courses, exam periods), and lists all the courses (and prerequisites) offered by each department. Take time to understand the requirements for your degree program; some programs have clearly defined course requirements while others are wide open.

### Register for Courses

[Academic Advising](#) and the [Registrar's Office](#) offer many resources to support you in the process of selecting and registering for your courses. Make choices for yourself based

on your interests and goals; be aware of course material, look at outlines, see the reading list. Cultural Studies may not be what you expect or Astronomy may require more math than you expect. Ask about courses, consider long term planning, but be open: you may take ERS because you like the environment, but it could become your major!

### Prepare to Learn

University teaches you the core concepts and methods of your chosen discipline(s), so you can begin to make sense of the world at a more complex level. Your professors expect that you will have already mastered the basic skills of reading, writing, and research. As a result, they will spend little, if any, time showing you grammar and punctuation or the paragraph, essay and bibliographic formats that you will need. Reflect on your skills and find opportunities to further develop them for success at university. Review more guides on the Academic Skills website and attend academic preparedness sessions during Orientation Week.

## What to Do During the First Week

### Check Out Your Courses

You can better understand the expectations of your courses once you read the outlines and preview the textbooks. In the first week, before classes begin, log in to the learning system (Blackboard) on MyTrent to explore your courses.

Look at each course syllabus or outline carefully: How much reading is expected? What topics will be covered? When are the assignments and exams due? What are the late policies? Be sure to attend the first lecture to learn more about the content of the course and the professor's approach to the subject.

Note that you can change your course selection, but you will want to do it in the first or second week to avoid getting behind. Deadlines for making course changes are posted in the academic calendar. Furthermore, don't wait too long to get your books, and pay attention to bookstore policies on ordering and returning texts and other course materials.

### Seek Advice

Trent is a very friendly place, built on a personal scale. Take advantage of this by seeking advice from as many people as you can. Ask second year students about courses and professors and talk to the professors themselves. You may find it helpful to consult an Academic Advisor if you have questions about your options in first year and beyond. The

[advising website](#) includes many useful resources and information about booking advising appointments.

### Explore the Campus

Learn the names and locations of buildings; check out the locations of all of your classes so you know where you are going when it's time for class. Ask upper year students or university staff for directions if you need them. [Review a map of campus](#) to learn the names of buildings and to become familiar with helpful landmarks.

### Find a Place Where You Can Work

As soon as possible, stake out a physical space that meets your requirements. If you need isolation and quiet, look for that. If you need to be around people, search for that space. If you need food while you work, look around the cafeterias. Different people require different working conditions, so look for a place that offers what you need.

### Get to Know the Library

The library is the centre of the scholarly universe; it continually brings in new information and ideas and pumps them out again into the real world (libraries even call this activity circulation). Of course, material is available online via the library website and on the web at large. But, please note that the library houses many reference books, monographs, maps, government documents, archival materials and the expertise of trained librarians and researchers; these are not always available in an online format. You may be used to

doing all of your research online, but the librarians can help you learn to find appropriate materials with directed searches.

It is a good idea to learn how to use the library before you are required to complete research for your first assignments. The library provides excellent online library skills tutorials that are available through the [library website](#).

### Explore Support Options

Trent offers many support services at both the Peterborough and Durham-GTA campuses. Either online or in person, take an opportunity to find out about the following:

- [Career Centre](#)
- [Student Accessibility Services](#)
- [Health Services](#)
- [Counselling](#)
- [First Peoples House of Learning](#)
- [Academic Skills](#)
- [Durham-GTA Student Supports and Services](#)

The staff in these offices is committed to providing you with academic and emotional support as you make the transition to university. Do not be afraid to ask for help; indeed, asking for assistance early, before a situation has become critical, is a key way to survive and thrive!

## What to Do During the First Month

### Organize Your Courses

Print your course schedule, or better yet, make a screenshot of your schedule the lock screen on your phone. A quick look can help you to learn your new schedule quickly, so you don't miss class or show up at the wrong location.

It is also helpful to download or print your course outlines for regular review. Read each course outline or syllabus carefully. They contain crucial course information: the goals and themes of the course, the schedule of class readings, the lecture schedule, the lab or seminar schedule, assignment due dates (and often, the assignment descriptions or instructions), the professor's office hours, and much more. Often, professors will assume that you are aware of the assignments and deadlines listed in the course and, as a result, will never mention them in class. Make an effort to review each syllabus weekly.

### Make a Plan to Manage Your Time

Creating a time management plan can help you to meet the new demands of university. First, your time is no longer as clearly organized and structured by school as it has been in the past. Second, you are responsible for figuring out what is expected of you and how you will meet those expectations. Third, you need to have balance in your life; it is important to have a great social experience that does not come at the expense of your learning experience at Trent. So, consider

how you can adapt to university and succeed academically while having fun. That is what time management is all about.

Learn more:

- [Academic Skills Guide to Time Management](#)
- [Planning tools and templates](#)

### Get to Class

One of the big differences between high school and university is the difference in attendance requirements: in university, you are often not required to attend class. You may be tempted to skip a class or two for one reason or another, but don't do it! Skipping class has a number of repercussions.

You will create a bad impression with your professors and tutorial leaders, implying that you have something more important to do than to attend class. You will also miss the chance to participate and to ask questions.

You will miss both information and learning. The information can be provided by a classmate, but the learning is gone for good. Another law of life says that whatever is discussed in the one class that you miss will make up the bulk of the exam!

### Speak Up – Don't Be Intimidated

For many students, university can be quite intimidating. Everything is new and confusing, and the other students seem so much more at ease and so much more knowledgeable

about what's going on. Everyone else must be much smarter, you may think. Wrong!

Actually, everyone is in pretty much the same boat; it's just that some people are better at hiding their insecurities than others. Don't be intimidated! Forget about everyone else and concentrate on learning what you need to know.

If you don't understand something or have questions, ask! If you find it difficult to participate in seminars, try writing out some ideas of interest or questions before you arrive. Having something written down may help you to speak with more confidence.

### Develop Your Listening and Notetaking Skills

University lectures can be quite different from what you are used to. Basically, a professor will stand at the front of a big room and talk to you for an hour or so, trusting that you will be able to listen to what is being said, figure out what is important enough to write down, think about the ideas being discussed, and develop questions. Often, the lecturer will also use PowerPoint, requiring you to read as well as listen. Your lectures may be recorded for you to review later, but this is not a replacement for attending class. We recommend three steps: review before lecture, listen and note during lecture, and summarize after lecture.

Learn more:

- [Academic Skills Guide to Listening and Notetaking](#)

## Develop Your Reading Skills

Academic reading is almost always difficult reading. It is usually densely packed with ideas and implications that need to be thought out and considered. The result is that your reading will take time – lots of it.

It will also require that you read actively and critically. Critical reading involves breaking the argument down into its parts to see how well each part works and how parts of the argument work together. In high school you developed the ability to determine what the text says. Your post-secondary reading will challenge you to determine what a text does and how it does it.

Different types of texts are read differently; however, you can use a similar three-step process for reading them all: preview, read closely, and reflect/review.

Learn more:

- [Academic Skills Guide to Reading Textbooks](#)
- [Guide to Reading Scientific Papers](#)
- [Guide to Reading in Humanities and Social Sciences](#)

## Develop Your Math Skills and Keep Up with Problem Sets

Don't expect math in your studies at Trent? Think again; students are often surprised to discover the importance of math in many disciplines: for example, statistics are integral to research in psychology, geography, and environmental and

resource studies; economics is discussed in international development studies, politics, and history; and math basics are necessary for nursing, accounting, and forensics.

Particularly for classes in mathematics, but also for problem-based courses like economics, statistics, physics and chemistry, you will be required to complete weekly exercises, which may be in place of or in addition to reading. Your success in these courses depends on your commitment to completing these exercises; working through problems, using formulae, and developing a mathematical vocabulary and skill base through practice will help you to make sense of course material that is more abstract and theoretical than the math you know from high school.

Another difference you may not expect: there is no in-class time to work on exercises; however, in some classes, voluntary workshop time is available. Lecture time is usually spent recording worked examples and taking notes on mathematical procedures and logic. As soon after class as possible, re-read your lecture notes and the section of the text that covers that topic. Use the margins to indicate important points and trouble spots. Then, work your way through the exercises assigned in the lecture, using the solved examples as a model. Some students find it helpful to work with a classmate or a study group to discuss solutions. If you get stuck, ask for help at workshops and labs or during your instructors' office hours.

Often, you may not find a solution to a question on the first attempt; but if you persevere, you will probably find the solution later. For this reason, you must not wait until the last minute to do assignments or to prepare for quizzes and tests. Train yourself to think logically. Understand the procedure used to reach solutions. While it is unlikely that you will be able to memorize everything, you will be expected to know basic formulas and to understand when and how to use them.

Learn more:

- [Academic Skills Resources for Math and Statistics](#)

## Develop Your Writing Skills

Most of your marks will come from your writing, either in assignments or exams. It makes sense, then, to focus on developing your writing skills. Many students find the writing assignments at university to be different and more challenging than high school writing.

### Writing and Analysis: Thesis and Evidence

The essay or research paper is the most common university writing assignment, but this form of writing differs considerably from writing in high school where your papers likely focused on providing detailed information to **describe** a topic. In a university paper, you will need to go beyond description to **explain**, **analyze**, and **interpret** a question, issue, or idea. This explanation or analysis becomes your argument or thesis, which you will support with detailed information or evidence.

## The Writing Process

There are several consistent steps to writing a paper, no matter the length or subject. Try to be thoughtful about your approach to writing, and try not to leave your assignments to the last minute.

1. Read assignment instructions closely. Break down questions and identify assignment requirements.
2. Brainstorm/Review: What course material is relevant? How can I narrow the topic? What questions should I ask to understand and analyze the topic?
3. Research/Read: Find and evaluate sources. Ask questions of sources and consider how to use evidence. Keep track of your sources.
4. Think/Outline: Refine your thesis/direction. Organize your thoughts into paragraphs.
5. Write a rough draft: Get your ideas down and revise them later. Cite your sources as you go!
6. Revise for organization and analysis first. Proofread for clarity and grammar.

Learn more:

- Academic Skills [Guide to Grammar and Clear Writing](#)
- [Essay Guide: Thesis Development](#)
- [Essay Guide: Beyond the 5-paragraph Essay](#)
- [Lab Report Guide](#)

## Value and Protect your Academic Integrity

Understand the expectations for original and independent work at university. As a registered student, you are expected to be familiar with the Undergraduate Academic Integrity Policy. Many students at Trent learn about the policy and how to maintain their academic honesty in a short online module, which is often required in 1000-level courses.

Learn more:

- Academic Skills [Guide to Documenting Sources](#)
- [Guide to Avoiding Plagiarism](#)
- [Trent University Undergraduate Academic Integrity Policy](#)

## What to Do During the First Term

### Study Throughout the Term

Leaving your studying to the night before the exam is a sure-fire recipe for disaster. Instead, spread your studying out over the whole term. The easy way to do this is to preview the reading before each lecture, review the lecture notes as soon as possible after each lecture, and review the previous week's notes before the next lecture. Not only will this make cramming for exams unnecessary, but it will help you to fit the lecture and reading material into a "whole" and give the course shape in your mind, something which will also help you write your papers, participate in class, and make reading less daunting. The more often you read and re-read the material, the more sense it will make and the more useful it will become.

### Review Your Progress and Adjust Your Plan

Keep an eye on your grades for assignments, quizzes, and exams. You may receive grades that are lower than you expect; many first-year students experience a decline in their grades from high school, so don't panic. Review any feedback you receive from your professors, and consider how you can adjust your work habits. Also, keep some perspective: everything has its short-term ups and downs. If you see a pattern of poor grades through the term, don't hesitate to talk to your course professor, meet with an academic skills instructor, or seek out academic advising.

## Seek Help When You Need It

Too many students make the mistake of thinking that they are in this alone. They are not, and you are not. Trent has numerous sources of support for students in need: Professors can be reached during office hours and by email. [Academic Advisors](#) and the [Career Centre](#) can help with understanding majors and goal setting. [Student Accessibility Services](#) can help with accommodations for disabilities; [Health Services](#) and [Counselling](#) provide personal help; and, of course, Academic Skills instructors can help with reading, writing, math, and listening skills. There are also [various peer supports](#) available to you as you navigate your new experiences at university.

Ask around. The help is probably there: you just need to find it.

## You can survive and thrive at university

Much research exists from psychology and education to suggest that student achievement cannot be solely predicted by previous performance or ability; rather it is the attitude of a student which is more closely linked to success at university. This means your approach to school, your willingness to participate and seek out assistance or advice, and your openness to ideas all affect how well you do in your studies.