MOVING ON TO UNIVERSITY:
STUDYING HISTORY AT ROYAL HOLLOWAY

A GUIDE FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS

2018-2019
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As you make the transition to university, you will find lots of differences between your experience at school or sixth-form college and life at Royal Holloway. We hope you settle in quickly and enjoy the challenges that await over the coming months! To help you make the transition to Royal Holloway, we would like to outline some of the ways in which undergraduate study is different from your earlier experiences.

At school or college, you will probably have grown used to having lots of direct instruction on your History studies, such as targeted advice on how to perform well in exams. As you would want and expect – and as is only fitting for higher education! – university study is rather different. Degree-level study involves working more independently and with this independence comes the opportunity to express yourself more creatively and imaginatively, and to explore ideas and concepts in new and innovative ways. This might seem a daunting prospect, but rest assured that during your first year and throughout the three years of your degree there is lots of help and support available from the History Department and the College more broadly. Nevertheless, as you set out at the start of your first term it is useful to think through how you going to tackle the new ways of studying that your degree will require.

Independent Learning

A crucial difference between school/college and university is the emphasis on independent learning. You may have come from A-Level study where the entire week was structured formally, following a pattern of lessons and a few free study-periods. You will find that at university your days and weeks are more flexible. Certainly you will have some set contact hours, when attendance is compulsory. The two main kinds of contact time are:

- Lectures: a formal presentation from an academic tutor delivered to students on a particular module, designed to inform you about the main themes of a particular topic
- Seminars: a smaller group class led by an academic tutor, often with 10-15 students. in which you are required to participate through debating key points

In order to study effectively for your degree, your learning must go well beyond your lectures and seminars. It is impossible to do well at university without independent study. For History students this often involves extensive reading and research, as well as writing. It is through independent study that you will really engage with and understand your various modules and the degree course as a whole, thereby making the most of your potential.

Reading

It is essential that you get used to reading effectively for your various modules: reading widely is not an optional extra, but an integral part of your degree. You may have spent some time during your A-Levels engaging with historians’ arguments, but you will soon find that degree-level study involves in-depth exploration of historians’ varied and sometimes competing interpretations of the past. Your tutors will not spoon-feed you snippets of historians’ books, but rather guide your engagement with relevant scholarship through wide-ranging discussion and feedback.
At university reading books cover to cover is not typical. During your first year you will learn the art of ‘gutting’ a book, making efficient use of the introduction and conclusion, the chapters and the index to help guide you towards key parts of the book. Also during first year you will also become very familiar with journal articles; that is, articles written for specialist periodicals. At around 8,000-10,000 words they are much shorter than books, and offer insights on in-depth themes and particular topics. Over time, you will come to learn how historians debate particular topics through their books and articles, and with practice you will become more adept at discussing their interpretations in seminars and in your own written work.

One key point: when you read, resist the urge to start taking notes immediately. Instead, skim read the book or article to get a sense of the whole, and then take notes on key points, rather than copying everything verbatim. Always remember to make a careful note of the publication details and page number so you can reference the material in an essay or return to it at a later date.

Before you arrive, think through how you will take notes and prepare accordingly. Many students use a laptop most or all of the time, others write by hand, and others a combination of the two. (Whatever you decide, make sure you always have a pen with you: you’d be surprised how many new students forget!)

Writing

During your A-Levels you were probably used to receiving direct instructions from teachers on how to write essays in order to meet set marking criteria, with the main emphasis on reproducing the information you had been given. At university your focus will be on marshalling together evidence yourself and formulating your own argument, drawing not just on information you have heard from tutors in lectures and seminars, but also from your wider reading, discussion with your peers and your own extensive reflection on the topic.

At university we won’t be giving you ‘templates’ or model essay answers we want you to replicate. It is important that you recognise there is no single model essay structure; for instance, using a certain number of paragraphs. As you will find, there can be numerous different answers to the same question: they might get the same mark, but arrive there using different information in different ways. Over time you will gain experience in working with our marking criteria: this will help guide you as you learn how to write degree-level essays which, above all, are driven by persuasive argument.

You will have LOTS of opportunities for feedback on your work. It’s vital that you discuss your writing with your tutors, both before you submit your essays and - especially - afterwards. It is crucial that you pay close attention to the written and verbal comments from your tutors. Engaging with feedback in a detailed and meaningful way is the easiest route to improve your skills, do yourself justice and work towards higher marks. We certainly hope you enjoy this intellectually rewarding process!
‘History Lab’

In addition to all the support from your individual tutors, the History Department runs dedicated skills workshops, feedback clinics and other events to help you make the most of your studies. Academic staff will offer insights into writing, giving oral presentations, and improving exam technique among other areas, with plenty of opportunity for collaboration among students. In addition to enhancing your degree studies, History Lab will help you develop analytical and communication skills that will be invaluable in the post-university world of employment. Being an undergraduate historian is a time of intellectual experimentation: History Lab is there to enhance your studies as you explore new ideas and develop new skills for yourself.

Time Management

While you will receive an individual timetable with all your main contact hours at the start of term, it is really important that you spend time planning your study. Before you arrive at Royal Holloway, make sure you have a diary ready to use: either a hard-copy academic diary for 2018-19, or the calendar on your laptop.

In your first two weeks of term you will have all the introductory lectures and seminars for your modules when module handbooks and other information will be distributed. After this, make sure you write down when all your deadlines are, so that you are able to plan your time thoroughly and know what to prioritise and when. There will be plenty of support on-hand to help you get organised.

Before you arrive

Before you arrive at Royal Holloway, you might like to do some preparatory reading.

While we would like to make clear this is not compulsory, we certainly would encourage you to be inquisitive. Why not try a history book on a topic you have never studied before? Try your local library or look online for cheap second-hand books from Amazon or other sites.

Watch a documentary or film on a historical topic: there is plenty to choose from on BBC iPlayer, Netflix, Amazon Prime and so on.

One great radio series to try is BBC Radio 4’s ‘In Our Time’ – there are lots of fantastic episodes to download on fascinating and unusual topics.

Please note: there is not a list of compulsory books you must buy.

New students sometimes ask for recommended general reading – though (again) you are not required to purchase these books (either new or second-hand). Copies are available in the Royal Holloway Library.


Jeremy Black and Donald MacRaild, *Studying History* (2016)

A good all-round guide to studying at university is:


There will be lots to take on board in your first few days and weeks, but please remember there is ALWAYS lots of support available from the History Department. We have long had a reputation as a friendly place! Sources of support will include your Personal Tutor, your module tutors, year tutors, and our admin team. You will receive lots more information about support in College in your first few days.

Coming to university can seem daunting at times, but remember: you would not be coming in the first place if you weren’t capable of doing a degree! We hope you settle in quickly and really enjoy your studies, and we look forward to getting to know you next term!

**Succeeding in First Year: Some Advice From Our Students**

Michael, Genevieve and Khuslen were in your position this time last year. Now about to go into second year, we asked them for their advice on succeeding in your first year.

**Michael Villar-Noguera**

Going into first year can seem like a daunting experience initially. You’ll have these impressions that university will throw you straight into the deep end. But that simply is not the case. Of course, the kind of work you’ll be doing is different and new, but it’s nothing to be afraid of. Working independently can be an extremely liberating experience; you have the opportunity to develop or even discover new research skills that best suit you, as well as finding a writing style that you can enjoy and will, hopefully, get you the best grades.

First year provides a fantastic opportunity to refine yourself academically, but there are also plenty of opportunities to enjoy yourself at the same time. Working independently does not mean working alone. Finding friends who are on your course, your neighbours in accommodation, or in the societies you join provide an excellent support group to encourage a healthy work ethic, like working in groups in the library, or to help you relax in your downtime, like going out to SU club nights or heading into town on the weekends.
There is more than enough free-time in your timetable to keep up with weekly seminar readings, researching and writing for essays whilst still being able to have fun. There will always be something you can do with your mates to chill out and enjoy the social side of university that will not leave you stuck pulling an all-nighter! There’s plenty of support academically within the university and socially from friends to call on if you need help adjusting.

Genevieve Wilks

Seminars may be intimidating at first, but you will get far more out of them if you contribute. Don’t be afraid to get things wrong as in doing this you’ll learn far more.

Often the reading you’re given for seminars isn’t something you can do the hour before. Set aside a large chunk of time and take it slowly in order to understand what you’re reading.

Don’t be afraid to ask your personal tutor or seminar leader questions. That’s what they’re there for.

Don’t be disappointed if you’re first essay didn’t go as well as you expected. It takes time to adjust to the new style of writing and your first year is the time to make mistakes.

Take the feedback from your seminar leaders on board. If it isn’t clear, go and see them in their Consultation and Feedback Hours and ask them to expand.

If a seminar leader puts on essay help or feedback sessions it is worth the time to go to them. It’s a time to clear up any difficulties you have with style and presentation. You can get a more in-depth analysis of how you did and how to improve.

I highly recommend reading through the Undergraduate Handbook and the Departmental Study Guide. It is vital to look at the sections on how to format and submit your essays. Getting the presentation right is a way to get easy marks so ensure you read it thoroughly.

Remember, there’s a life outside your degree. Getting involved in teams and societies is a great way to meet new people and have some time away from your studies.

Khuslen Ganzorig

As someone whose entire History education before stumbling into uni was either Britain in the World Wars, its European pals or the nation’s favourite royal dynasty the Tudors, I did not expect to love the Romans so much so that for my second year I would pick every single Roman module!

As tempting as it was during Freshers to pick courses you know you’ll be a clever little bot in, it is nowhere near as pleasurable as reading
and writing about entire periods and peoples that you have just discovered. I would suggest that since Year One is a time for you to see what you might appreciate and what you won't, step out of your shell and do something you know absolutely zilch about.

And finally ... top tips from our current students for making the most of your first year

'When you are settling in, remember everyone is in the same boat! Introduce yourself, get stuck in and you’ll soon make friends on your course, in your halls and in societies & sports clubs.'

Join the History Society. It’s a great way to get to know people and adds another layer to your university experience.'

'Get organised as soon as possible! This is really the key to settling in with your studies. Get a proper routine in place and everything will fit together. You’ll be able to balance your studies and societies/sports, and enjoy them properly because you’ve managed your time.'

'Talk to your lecturers. If you’re not sure about something on a module or have any kind of issue talk to your tutor in Consultation and Feedback Hours – it’s good to get direct advice.'

'Get to know your Personal Tutor, as well as your other lecturers. It’s good to have ports of call you are confident in when you need support, so make yourself known.'

'Make use of first year as a time to experiment with different learning styles. You might try planning and writing essays different ways and see which suits you best.'

'When you get essays back, talk to your tutors in their Consultation and Feedback Hours for advice on how to improve and this will help you in the longer term.'

'Don’t fall into the trap of thinking first year doesn’t matter because it’s not “weighted” as part of your final degree mark. It’s not good to get into bad habits because this only makes it harder in the long run.'

'Early in the year spend time in the libraries, getting used to how they work and knowing where the main history sections are. If you can’t find a book you’re looking for, ask at the front desk – they are helpful...’
‘Make sure you take proper breaks. It’s almost impossible to work solidly for hours, so take breaks, for an hour or two, or even a few minutes if you’re really busy. This is really important for your sanity! Make sure you de-stress and relax, or you burn out.’

‘Make the most of College support services like CeDAS – Centre for the Development of Academic Skills - they have lots of good advice and can make all the difference to your uni experience. Their workshop on exam techniques really helped me, for example. DDS - Disability and Dyslexia Services - also definitely helped me out too: I have dyslexia and they gave me some extra resources.’

‘Try and enjoy it! It is stressful leaving home and getting used to everything, but commit to all the different part of your uni experience and you’ll have a good time!’

We look forward to welcoming you to the History Department and to working with you over the next three years!