

11 Skills for success at college/university

You know that you need to be an active participant in class. You know that you have to study hard and read your assigned material. But what are the exact skills you need to have to get good grades on your assignments?

This chapter focuses on the basic skill set related to listening, reading, and writing that you need to get great grades. Speaking and oral communication skills are covered in Chapter 12.

Reading skills

Depending on what your subject area or major/course is in college/university, you could have a large amount of reading assigned each week. This is especially true for the humanities and social sciences, such as sociology, literature, psychology, or subjects such as business. There will of course be reading to do for the sciences, but it's not usually as much as the humanities.

Some of your professors/lecturers and instructors will assign readings without worrying about your other classes/lectures or how much work or other responsibilities you have. So get ready to read more than you think you'll need to.

Because you'll be reading so much, you need to figure out how to read in the best way possible to save time and understand what you're reading well.

Increasing your reading speed

The average English-speaking adult reads 250–300 words per minute. You'll probably be a bit slower than this for a

while because this isn't your first language. There are many ways you can improve your speed, however, which will save you precious time, especially when reading for essays, research papers, and exams.

Websites such as www.spreader.com and www.zapreader.com are useful tools to help improve your speed-reading on a word-by-word, or line-by-line basis. You can use these sites to move text at different speeds to make yourself read faster and faster each time. You can also copy and paste whatever text you want into them.

These sites help you remember that you can't spend too much time hanging over each specific word. As a second-language reader, you probably want to fully understand what the meaning of each and every word is. At university or college, with the amount of reading you'll have to do, you just won't have time to read in that way.

Skimming and scanning

Skimming is reading for gist, or the main idea. This is important to do when you haven't got a lot of time. Scanning is reading for facts and figures, data, and numbers. This is useful for answering questions when you haven't got a lot of time.

As in your own language, check for sub-headings in the article or chapter you've been asked to read. These should give you a quick idea of the main ideas covered in your reading. Many textbooks have a summary at the end of each chapter. It can help to read this first to know what the main ideas are before you tackle the whole thing.

Listening skills

Are you a good listener? Are you fully alert and attentive when you're listening to a lecture or discussion? During your courses, you'll have to do a lot of listening.

Tips for improving listening skills:

Do:

- Get enough sleep so you don't fall asleep in class!
- Have your notebook, pen/pencil, and textbooks with you so you can always take notes when you need, or refer to things the professor/lecturer is talking about in the book.

Don't:

- Don't sit with your own nationality or language group. They're sure to distract you. You need to focus on English all the time. Sit near home students if you can, especially the students who ask interesting questions or have helpful or useful things to say during class discussions.
- Don't come to the class/lecture hungry or thirsty—this will make it hard for you to concentrate and focus on what is being said.
- Don't interrupt the professor/lecturer or classmates when they're speaking. Even if you're very excited about what you want to say, wait, listen, and learn.

Note-taking skills for lectures

Taking notes during lectures is very stressful at first. If you follow some of these guidelines, however, you'll soon get faster and more efficient in what you decide to write down. It can be easier to write notes in your own language at first, but it's best to reach the point where you can take notes in English.

Overall, college/university lectures are often presented in a format similar to an essay. The key parts are:

- introduction;
- presentation of important points with support;
- conclusion.

It helps a lot if you make sure you know which part of the lecture you're in. You can do this by listening for signal

words and phrases and transition words. Here are just a few common examples:

Introduction

“Okay, let’s get started.”

“Okay, class, we have a lot to go over/cover today, so let’s get started.”

Transitions between specific points or ideas

“So now let’s look at ...”, “Let me move on to ...”, “Let’s go now to ...”

Conclusion

“So, we’ve discussed X, Y, and Z ...”, “To summarize ...”, “In conclusion ...”

transition (noun): A transition is a process in which something changes from one state to another.

Tips for note-taking:

Do:

- Create a system of abbreviations (like num. for “number” or “Dr.” for doctor) and symbols (+ for “and” or @ for “at”) to write faster.
- Pay close attention the speaker’s body language and tone of voice to help you know more information about the words he or she is saying.
- Learn to listen for key facts, data, or numbers, like you scan for key facts, data, or numbers when reading quickly.
- Increase your vocabulary whenever you can: it will help you in your listening.
- Think about what you know already about the topic before the class/lecture starts.
- Stay focused—don’t let yourself daydream and lose your concentration.

- Read a bit before the class/lecture. For example, if you know the topic from your syllabus, look through the chapter related to the next class lecture topic. This will give you an idea of the subject, as well as help introduce you to new vocabulary.
- Reread your notes shortly after the class/lecture, to help you remember the ideas presented in the class/lecture.
- Compare notes with other students during study groups to see what you've missed.
- Find out if your professor/lecturer is posting the lecture slides online, or providing students with copies of them. If so, you can focus on writing down what he or she says in addition to this instead of copying down the slide.

Don't:

- Don't try to write down everything you hear, or even write full words (remember: abbreviations and symbols!).
- Don't let yourself be distracted by other students. If someone is talking to you, sit somewhere else.
- Don't let a boring professor/lecturer keep you from thinking about the topic. Think about the words, not how the lecturer is saying them.
- Don't take photos of the board with your smartphone, or only record the lecture without taking notes. These habits actually take more of your time in the long run.
- Don't worry if you're finding it difficult: it's well known that listening and writing is difficult to do at the same time without missing some information. If possible, try not to start writing too quickly but focus on the main idea in the message before making a note of it.

Organizing your notes

There are different ways you can organize your notes in your notebook. Always write the title of the class/lecture and professor/lecturer at the top of the page so that you know

what the notes are for when you refer back to them later. Add the subject of the class/lecture too, for example, if the class is part of your Literature module, add “Literature” at the top of the page too. You might even want to use different colors for different modules. It’s also good to add the date.

Some people draw a line down the page to create a long narrow space on the right-hand side. You can then use this space to write:

- any questions you have as you are listening;
- references to other articles or books you should read;
- useful websites;
- important facts or figures.

Then you can write your notes on the left-hand side of the page using your abbreviation system. It’s up to you how you organize your notes. You need to find a system that works for you.

At the end of the lecture, some people like to write the three key points of the lecture right at the top of the page in bullet point form so that they have an at-a-glance reminder of what the content of the lecture was.

Writing skills

Handwriting

It might seem strange to mention, but handwriting is still very important in the classroom. You will type most of your written work. However, exams will be written by hand. Professors/Lecturers and TAs often complain that many of their students have illegible handwriting. If your handwriting is terrible, it can make you look childish. If you aren’t sure of how to improve your handwriting, you can use materials such as *Collins Work on Your Handwriting* to improve your skills.

On college language entrance tests, including IELTS, illegible handwriting is not acceptable. Examiners will simply mark your answer as incorrect if they have to try too hard to figure out what you're trying to say.

illegible (adj): Writing that is illegible is so unclear that you cannot read it.

Spelling

Some students think that spelling is so difficult in English that it's really not that important. This is not true. It's extremely important to be able to spell correctly in all of your coursework. Many native English-speaking children spend the years of schooling up until college/university level regularly working on their spelling through regular quizzes, spelling contests, and correction from teachers. Adults still have to regularly check their spelling, even if they're well-educated. It takes a lot of work and practice to learn to spell well in English.

If you can't spell, the professor/lecturer will think:

- you're uneducated;
- you're being lazy (why haven't you looked the word up, for example?);
- you don't know English as well as you probably do.

Many students rely on their word processor's spell-check function to correct their spelling. While built-in spelling checkers are a useful tool, remember that they don't pick up everything! For example, if you wrote "to" when you meant to write "too," your spell checker will not pick up your mistake, because "to" is a correctly spelled English word.

Essays

You will often be asked to write essays to show your knowledge of a subject covered in your class. These can be part of a quiz/test or an exam. Although many of the ESL or

EFL classes you've taken may have focused heavily on the classic 5-paragraph essay, remember that this structure is not always the correct one to use. The essay structure you use will depend on what sort of essay you need to write.

Short essays

Often, especially for an exam, you might need to write a short essay of one or two paragraphs to answer a question. This means that you'll usually write a kind of summary, to explain a key concept or event from the course readings or lectures for example.

Long essays

Your professor/lecturer might ask you to write a longer essay as an assignment. This might take one of the many essay forms, such as cause and effect or argumentative.

Essays will often have a very specific word count, so make sure you read through the instructions on your exam or assignment very carefully. Don't write more or less than you're asked to.

Research papers

In the US, a research paper is similar to an essay. However, it requires you to research and find evidence from other writers to support your ideas. It follows a very exact format. Depending on where and what you're studying, you'll use a different format. Your professor/lecturer will tell you what format to follow. If you study in the social sciences in the US, for example, you'll probably use mostly American Psychological Association (APA) style, but if you're in humanities, you'll need Modern Languages Association (MLA) for your papers. In the UK, Canada, and elsewhere, you'll usually follow the style guide for your university, or the one commonly used in your subject.

In the UK, a research paper is slightly different. Here it refers to original research where you do your own investigation

and write about it. The word “paper” can refer to research in the form of an essay or conference presentation. You may never have to write a research paper as an undergraduate student in the UK.

format (noun): The format of something is the way or order in which it is arranged and presented.

How a research paper is different from an essay

In the US, a research paper is not a simple explanation of an idea, or other people’s ideas, as with an essay. The point of the research paper is for you to investigate and research what has been done in your area before, to use and cite other people’s opinions and conclusions on the subject, and then present your own ideas related to the subject. It’s a great chance for you to read and learn a lot more about your subject, learn to argue with evidence, and form your own, original perspective and ideas on the topic.

In the UK, the word “essay” would be used for what is termed a research paper in the US.

cite (verb): If you cite something, you quote it or mention it, especially as an example or proof of what you are saying.

Thesis

A thesis is a term used for a larger than normal research paper, a final writing project, at the Master’s degree level in the US. This is also called a dissertation in the UK and other countries. In the UK, some students complete dissertations at undergraduate level.

Dissertation

This is also the term used for the final research project that students do for a PhD at colleges/universities in the English-speaking world. It takes a great deal of time and a huge

amount of research to finish. In the UK, the word “thesis” is normally used at PhD level.

Multiple-choice

Taking a difficult multiple-choice exam is a real skill. Extremely close reading is absolutely necessary because of all the trick questions that are often included. These tests usually use answers that are very close to each other, with a word or two that act as clues.

Higher-order thinking skills

Higher-order thinking skills (sometimes called “HOTS”) are a major part of being a successful student at college/university. The professors/lecturers of your classes/courses will expect you to have strong higher-order thinking skills, and to be able to use them in class discussions, essays, exams, and research papers.

When teachers of all kinds introduce their students to the idea of HOTS, they often first introduce Bloom’s Taxonomy. Dr. Bloom was an American educational psychologist who, together with other educational psychologists of the 1950s, developed a classification system for the identification and practice of HOTS. At the beginning, it was meant to help educators assess their students’ ability to think at a high level. To this day, educators use the following ideas to guide their practice and assessment of student progress.

The pyramid of thinking skills starts at the bottom and works its way up to the highest level of thought.

- Remembering/Acquiring knowledge (the lowest-level, but necessary, thinking skill):
Are you able to remember the information you are being taught?

- **Understanding:**
Are you able to explain the ideas and concepts you have learned?
- **Applying:**
Can you use the information you have learned in a new way?
- **Analyzing:**
Can you see and examine what the different parts of a subject are?
- **Synthesizing:**
Can you argue or take a stand or position on the subject and explain your position?
- **Evaluating (the highest-level thinking skill):**
Can you use what you've learned to create something, or an idea, that is totally new?

All of these skills are important. The first two levels are common throughout the world's education systems. However, in some countries and courses, teachers rarely ask you to do more than that. You must prepare yourself to be able to go up to evaluation level for anything you do, whether it's in your discussions or research papers.

For more detailed information on the skills you need to succeed at college/university, read *Collins Academic Skills* series. Go to www.collinselt.com.