

GUIDES FOR STUDENTS

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The strange world of the university

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The world of the university – academia – is a world of its own. It's very different from the 'real world' in which you and I and most other people exist. If you are a student, it's crucial to your success that you are aware of the many differences between the two worlds and can move easily between them.

Out there, in the real world, life goes on. People live and work, raise children, socialize, pursue leisure interests, and so on. Many other human activities and processes are going on as well, like manufacturing and trading and communicating and providing services of many kinds. Out there too are a host of natural phenomena: to do with the climate, all kinds of matter and energy, chemical reactions, the birth, growth and death of living things – you name it!

The academic world, on the other hand, is full of mental constructs: descriptions, theories and explanations, ideas and critiques. You and I can't experience such mental constructs in the same way that we experience the real world – directly, through seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling. Instead we have to get them into our heads through the medium of – in particular – the written word and the spoken word, via books and articles and web pages, and the lectures that academics give. 'It is a peculiarity of academic learning that its focus is not the real world itself but others' views of that world.'¹

What this means is that in the academic world you'll be learning at second hand, so to speak, rather than through your own experience, as you do in the real world. Learning at second hand does not come naturally to most people. You need some help. Sadly, such help is in short supply in the academic world, a deficiency that the Student-Friendly Guides are designed to help to remedy.

But differences in ways of learning are far from being the only differences between the academic world and the real world. You think you can read, right? In the academic world, you're probably wrong, on two counts.

First, if you're at university in an English-speaking country you may have the impression that the books and articles you're told or recommended to read are in English. Certainly the words and grammar look like English, but don't be misled: they're actually written in 'academic-speak'. Academic-speak is a long way removed from day-to-day spoken and written English. In particular, it makes far more use of abstract words and expressions: they exist in thought or as ideas but don't have a physical or concrete existence. So reading academic-speak is not the same as reading ordinary English. You've got to translate as you read, so it's much more like reading a foreign language, with lots of looking up words in the dictionary and puzzling over the grammar. Inevitably, it's a slow process at first. It takes time to become fluent.

What makes matters even more problematic is that every subject has its own particular academic-speak. So if you're taking courses in several subjects, you have several 'foreign languages' to get used to. Don't let this discourage you: most people manage it. The secret is to be aware of what's going on: it makes those times when you feel you're not making progress much easier to cope with.

Second, you may arrive at university taking it for granted that 'reading' means something like 'starting a book at page 1 and reading all the way through to the end'. Beware! 'Reading' in the academic world means using books to find what you want in them. If you try to read everything on your so-called 'reading lists' all the way through you're heading for a nervous breakdown. Think of reading as a 'treasure hunt': an active search for what you want rather than an attempt to soak up and absorb everything you come across.

Other words too have strange meanings in the academic world. You think 'discuss' and 'argue' refer to conversations with other people? Forget it! In most essay-requiring subjects you'll have to discuss and produce arguments on your own.

The world of Higher Education in the UK is not exactly a happy place at the present time. The [University Student Mental Health Survey 2018](#), based on a poll of almost 38,000 UK students, found that rates of psychological distress and illness were on the rise in universities, with 'alarmingly high' levels of anxiety, loneliness, substance misuse and thoughts of self-harm.

In recent years local remuneration committees have awarded [massive salary increases to the vice-chancellors](#) who head them, while making increasing use of hourly-paid lecturers on zero-hours and other precarious contracts. A [report published in 2016](#) by the academics' trade union spelled this out: approaching 50% of all academic staff were on insecure contracts. Matters are improving here and there, but if you are an undergraduate in a UK university, it is very likely that you are being taught by someone on an insecure or precarious contract.

It is staff below the level of full professors, including part-timers and graduate students (who do much of the teaching in universities), who are likely to be on such contracts. So they face working conditions that leave them underpaid, vulnerable and constantly facing the prospect of unemployment. Part-timers may not be in a position to spend much time on campus, so their availability to students may be very limited. Bear in mind that, as the union says, their working conditions are your learning conditions.

While some part-timers are devoted to their teaching, in general teaching in university takes second place to research. Almost all academics did well as students at university and are now doing research as well as teaching. So the chances are that they're (a) quite talented at their subjects, and (b) quite preoccupied with their research work, especially as almost all academics still get promotion on the basis of their research publications, not their teaching achievements.

Not only does the pressure on academics to produce publications and perform administrative duties put a limit on the time and energy they can put in to teaching: talented people, people who have an intuitive flair for their subject, can be really poor at explaining it, because when they were students themselves, they were able to tackle it by leaps and bounds: they didn't have to go slowly, step by step, as mere mortals do. Although many academics are dedicated to teaching, many of them have had little or no training in how to teach. And what training there is tends to omit what is arguably the most important skill of all for a teacher, that of empathizing and developing rapport, without which a teacher has no chance of being able to put himself or herself in the shoes (and head) of a student grappling with a task.

As a student, you may also find that academics distance themselves from you in all sorts of ways. Unless you're really fortunate, you'll be treated not as a junior member of a learning community but as if you belong to a separate species. You'll be a distraction from research, a burden ('workload'). You'll be treated as one of the masses, to whom education is to be 'delivered'. You'll be someone in an audience, listening and/or trying to take notes while the speaker gives a lecture, a one-way mode of communication entrenched in academia. You may find, like many students, that the feedback you get on your work is more criticism than appreciation, focusing on bad points and ignoring the good ones, while at the same time not helping you to see what to do if you're to get better marks for your next piece of work. And at exam time you may experience the relationship with your teachers as a kind of game, in which you have to work out for yourself what the rules are for winning: what the examiners' expectations are, what approach, style etc. will be rewarded and what will be penalized.

I suspect that all institutions are capable of messing up the lives of the people who work for and within them. I don't see universities as an exception to this rule. At some point different academics will be giving you different and conflicting advice about some aspect of your work. And there will be mixed messages to look out for. For example, you may be given group projects to work on to develop your 'teamwork skills', and at the same time be warned very strictly against collaborating with other students on writing tasks: this is regarded as 'collusion' and will be punished!

Does all this sound very gloomy? I can't pretend that I don't think that the culture of higher education in the UK is in serious need of reform: I do. But for you that's a side issue. If you're to succeed as a student the first thing you have to do is to appreciate the nature of the system you've signed up to, which is why I feel it important to be absolutely realistic about it. It's only when you know the system, warts and all, that you can formulate your own strategy for dealing with it. Without such a strategy, you'll have no confidence in what you're doing. You'll be looking anxiously all over the place for clues as to what you should be doing and how you should be doing it. You'll be dragged this way and that, all over the place, trying to keep up. It's like running after a bus, trying to catch it but never quite

managing it, tiring yourself out and getting your lungs full of exhaust fumes in the process: a thoroughly frustrating experience.

In the Student-Friendly Guides, my overall aim is to help you to take control of your studies, to be confident in what you're doing, and ultimately to get what you want out of your university experience – which I hope will include both fun and having your mind stretched. To this end I have done my best to demystify and make sense of the academic world, to address the many issues which students raise, and to suggest practical courses of action. I've tried to write in plain English, and to help you deal with academic-speak. Whether you've come to university from school or FE college, or you're a mature student or an international student, I hope these guides will help you to master and enjoy your studies, and to win the qualification you're after.

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Notes and references

1. Diana Laurillard, *Rethinking University Education* (Routledge, 1993) ch. 1 and p. 50
2. White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, cm5735 (The Stationery Office, 2003), para. 1.18

[See *Write Great Essays!*, ISBN 9780335237272]