

# FAQ from Entering Students

## **I did very well in high school, but I'm still worried about whether I'll be able to handle university-level work.**

Almost all first-year students have concerns about how successful they'll be in a new academic environment. Contrary to what you might think, research has shown that those students who get the best marks aren't necessarily the ones with the highest IQs. Of course some measure of intelligence, ability, and talent is necessary to be successful in the intellectual tasks involved in higher learning, but there are other factors which are equally if not more critical to academic achievement than IQ.

One of the most important of these is learning and study skills. These include the basics like reading, writing, and problem solving - the skills for which high school provides a foundation. University courses, however, require higher or more complex learning. For example, you need the ability to:

- analyze facts and concepts
- apply what you've learned in one situation to a new situation
- synthesize information from differing sources and come up with new ideas, solutions or approaches, and
- evaluate the ideas of others.

These tasks require creativity and the ability to analyze, to think and read critically, and to solve problems.

## **I've heard that many students' marks drop in first semester. Is this true?**

Generally, marks drop at the end of first semester for new students from their Grade 12 averages. The reasons for this drop are as varied as the students who experience it. Some students have difficulty adjusting to a new and very different environment, while others struggle with finding a balance between socializing and working. Compared to life at home and in high school, university can seem very unstructured, and many new students lack skill and experience in organizing and prioritizing a number of competing (and sometimes difficult) tasks. The Counselling

Department provides a range of resources and programs to help students sustain the high academic achievement they experienced in high school.

## **What's the most common study problem for first-year students?**

Although each program and course presents different challenges for different people, we've found that the most common problem among new students in all programs is procrastination. Many students get into the habit of procrastinating in high school, where it's possible for bright students to do assignments, write papers or study for tests at the last minute and still receive excellent marks. In university there are so many opportunities for socializing that studying can easily get pushed to the bottom of the priority list, particularly at the beginning of the semester.

Students may also mistakenly assume that the study strategies that produced high marks in high school will do the same in university. However, at midterm time, if studying and reading are done at the last minute, many inexperienced students find that the volume of material and/or its complexity make it difficult to achieve the same high exam marks they obtained in high school. You may want to check out our resources on time management to learn about strategies for keeping procrastination (and the workload) under control.

## **I've heard that the workload, particularly reading, is very heavy. Even though I did well in high school, I'm worried about whether I'll be able to handle it.**

Good time management skills are critical to handling the workload at university. However, because skills such as planning time and controlling procrastination aren't usually emphasized in high school, and because many students don't take a full course load in their Grade 12 year, some new students are caught off guard by the workload. When it comes to getting academic work done, you are your own boss. You'll need to learn to keep tabs on not only how much work is getting done, but how effectively it's getting

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done as well. This "self-monitoring" is essential in the unstructured learning environment of the university. Because you must plan, organize and prioritize all the work done outside of classes and labs, skills such as short- and long-term planning, determining the most effective time to do specific tasks, deciding what is most important to do first, and estimating how long a task will take are critical to academic success. It is also important to learn how to motivate yourself to get down to work, to stick with difficult or boring tasks, to keep procrastination under control and to maintain a balance between work and leisure. Information and help with all these time management skills is available from the Counselling Department.

### **What is the difference between a high school essay and a university-level essay?**

A high school essay which is well organized, grammatically correct, on topic, and which displays a comprehensive understanding of the subject will usually receive an 'A'. A similar paper would likely not receive the same mark in university. Here, to receive a good grade, an essay must advance an argument about a subject and must be analytical and critical when it proves that its argument is a valid one.

### **Will university essays be marked on grammar and style as well as content?**

All university professors grade not only the content of an assignment but also "the student's ability to use correctly and effectively the language appropriate to the assignment." Content and the way we write are inextricably linked. We all know that if we are sure of exactly what we want to say, we communicate clearly and logically. Thus, the way we write is very often an indicator of our understanding of a subject. If professors reading an essay have difficulty, because of poor grammar, inaccurate word choice or confusing sentence structure, and have to read sentences over and over again in an attempt to decipher the meaning, they will conclude that the student does not clearly understand the subject. Even those professors who do not assign a specific proportion of the grade for grammar and style will receive a negative overall impression from a paper which they have had difficulty marking. The result of

a poorly written paper, no matter how innovative the ideas, is almost always a lower mark.

### **What's the semester system really like?**

UFV's academic semester consists of fifteen weeks of classes and two weeks of exams. Students may run into difficulty with the semester system if they procrastinate in the first week or two of classes, with the assumption that there will be time later on to catch up. But midterm exams can begin as early as the fourth week of the semester, and classes continue during the midterm exam period, so "later on" there's usually a scramble to complete regular assignments and prepare for exams, with little extra time to catch up on reading and other work not done earlier. Time planning that takes into account both day-to-day tasks and major assignments is also important since due dates can sneak up very quickly. Keeping on top of your work right from the beginning of the semester is really the key to handling the demands of the semester system.

### **I'm not sure what to major in, or what I want to do after I graduate. Will this put me at a disadvantage?**

Probably not, although you should be able to articulate why you're at university, even if you're not sure what you want to major in yet, or what career you'd like. Some students start university with very clear and specific goals in mind for the program and the career they want. If you're in this situation, hang on to those goals, but don't be afraid to review, revise and change them. It can also be helpful to think about why and how your goals were formulated in the first place - have you always loved animals and wanted to be a vet, or has it just always been expected that you would go to vet school because one of your parents did?

If you don't have any specific goals yet, use the time and resources at your disposal to get to know yourself, your interests and abilities, and to find out all your career options. Use your first few semesters to explore different subject areas you think you might be interested in, keeping in mind the requirements for any graduate or professional programs you might want to apply for. Everyone has different talents and interests, so it's important that when you do choose a

major you do so carefully, making sure that your goals are consistent with your abilities, talents and interests. Your counsellor can provide all the details on programs available at UFV. They have a vast amount of information to help you to figure out what kind of work you want to do.

### **Want more information?**

The Counselling Department is the best source for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford - 604-854-4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack - 604-795-2808 (E 105) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at [www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/](http://www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/).

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