

What makes HCA so special?

Tanvi shares her experience of being an international student, and the supportive community of School of History, Classics and Archaeology.

Student life in Edinburgh is colourful and multifaceted, and this is something that the University has continued to provide throughout my time as a student here. My experience at the School of History, Classics and Archaeology (HCA) started during Covid so my entire first year was online. I found that as an international student this eased the transition from home to university for me, somewhat. However, at the same time it sometimes made engagement difficult. I found, though, that the University – and especially HCA – strived to remedy this lack of in-person learning. And now, as a third-year student studying full-time in person, I find that the same opinion of student life here holds up.

Academic rigour



The School of History, Classics, and Archaeology provides not only a large variety of degree options, but also an allowance for flexibility and diversity

within those degrees. In addition to a wide range of course options, HCA implements a balanced but academically challenging environment – something that is put in place from

day one.

From my personal experience as a student from the USA, schools don't have an A-level system and the courses offered are general and broad, with no opportunity for Classics or Archaeology backgrounds. I found that even with no prior knowledge of Classical Archaeology and Ancient History – although I was surrounded by peers who had the opportunity to take a Classics A-level – HCA has ensured an all-round and in-depth introduction to the subject. Overall, the class structure, assessment style, and myriad of course opportunities have allowed me to garner the same proficiency in my chosen degree as someone who had prior knowledge of some of the course material. I have found that other international students with a similar background have shared this experience in other degrees.

In addition to literal content, HCA implements an academic system with additional external support from faculty and such tools as the HCA writing centre and peer mentors that result in a higher output of quality of academic work. Three years at HCA have taught me – besides academic content – the professional qualities associated with research, writing, and presentation in regard to my academic work and external projects.

Faculty

The academic opportunities that University of Edinburgh students have are a product of the faculty. The School ensures a broad panel of faculty spanning multiple historical, classical, and archaeological specialties. This not only allows the greater variety of choice for incoming and prospective students in pre-honours, it also allows honours students to choose from a large pool of academics to determine their postgraduate pathways and dissertation topics/guidance. In this way, the HCA faculty pushes students to explore various topics that allow them to experience a very varied

subject area.

Societies



By far some of the most influential engagement among students in HCA comes from the History, Classics and Archaeology societies. As a member of the Archaeology Society, I have found myself not only meeting other students in my course subject, but also other HCA students in HCA through joint society events. By meeting other people in the same subject as me my academic life has improved, which encourages me in my studies. And by gaining access to the wider HCA student network, this has created and sustained an even more warm and welcoming environment in the School.

In addition to the social aspect of the society programs, the academic and professional opportunities awarded to members and attendees is immensely helpful. Through opportunities like conferences and lectures by experts in various fields, the students of HCA have a wonderful chance to widen their academic horizons while also networking amongst academic professionals. And it allows them to browse and gain familiarity with future career opportunities. The Archaeology Fieldwork Fair instituted by the Archaeology Society provides multiple career and fieldwork opportunities annually in addition to other opportunities offered within HCA. The University also has a number of heritage and collections

internship positions for students in the relevant fields, providing valuable experience for the future.

The wider University community

The resources and support available in HCA are supplemented by the environment of the rest of the University, and its faculty and students. The multicultural and diverse surroundings of the University and the wider Edinburgh area is truly something that not only influenced my decision to attend the University, but has deeply affected my current experience here as a student. As an international student, and a person of colour, the University of Edinburgh has created a central community in which students of all backgrounds, interests, and identities can collectively explore the beauty that the city has to offer.

Essays – everything you ever wanted to know but were afraid to ask

Student Ambassador Tess (studying Classics and English Literature, MA Hons) takes a deep dive into how to approach writing essays.

I think writing essays and academic papers are probably one of the more daunting tasks you'll have to take on as a university student. I've spent the last three years trying to figure out a formula that works for both aspects of my degree, and honestly, sometimes I still am not sure if I've cracked it. That being said, I do have two tricks of the trade to keep in mind when writing an essay:

Break your question down into its essential parts

Once you write a few essays, you start to realise that all essay questions have a similar structure. There are only so many ways the examiners can ask you 'To what extent' and once you recognise certain buzzwords, it becomes much easier to formulate a plan of attack. Here are some examples:



'To what extent...', 'How far...', 'What...' and 'Evaluate ...' often signify questions that ask you to discuss whether you agree with a certain point of view on a debated topic within the subject. The best way to approach these questions is to

pick a stance and then find opposing arguments that you can dismantle to show a bit more academic sophistication.

In comparison, 'Describe...', 'Illustrate...', 'How...' and 'Explain...' are usually questions that require a more holistic approach to a topic, in which you have to discuss as many facets of the topics as possible in relation to the question (word limit permitting).

Another aspect of the question to look out for are certain key phrases you can use throughout your essay to signal-post to the reader throughout your essay that you are still addressing the question. Constantly linking your essay back to the question in your essay also helps you to stay on topic as a writer.

Here's an example of a question and how you can break it down:

'What is depicted on the Parthenon Frieze?'

This question seems relatively simple, but it is one of the

most debated topics within Classical Greek archaeology. The use of 'What' indicates that you have to pick an academic stance and justify why you think this is the most likely hypothesis using both primary and secondary sources. You should then pick one or two opposing perspective to evaluate, in order to demonstrate why your chosen interpretation is still the best. Additionally, you should always round a point off with a: 'therefore, as (evidence) demonstrates, (point) is what is depicted on the Parthenon frieze.' That way you are able to double check as you are editing if your points are properly explained to allow such a statement at the end and your examiner will also be able to pick up quickly if you are doing so because you have used words from the question itself, such as 'depicted.'

Reference well from the start

Referencing is simultaneously the easiest way to secure and lose marks in an essay. I had so many instances in first year where I lost a significant number of points for poor referencing that had me kicking myself, mainly because it would have potentially pushed me up a grade boundary. The one thing I cannot stand when reading feedback is finding out that I didn't get full marks on a section that is so clearly set out by the subject area. The School uses a variation of the Harvard system and every citation form is listed out in the Essay Guidelines. There is literally *no* reason besides carelessness for someone to not score fully on this section (I promise I speak from experience).



The best way to ensure you follow the guidelines to a tee is to reference properly from the start. Even when I am reading and taking notes on my computer, I will reference quotes and

points in the correct format from the beginning. This ensures that when I write my essay and use said quotes from my notes, I can rest assured that the referencing is already done and dusted. Additionally, if you start building your bibliography at the start, it means that you have one less thing to worry about in your editing stage of your essay. It's so much easier to remove any additional sources you ended up not using than scrambling to find a source you forgot to note down during your research stage.

Easy. Right? Don't worry, there's lots of help both in the School and the University with writing essays and other assignments. Look out for Peer Support Groups – SHCA has ArchPals and UoE HCA Peer Support – and Societies running sessions on writing and studying, and the Institute for Academic Development offers workshops and online resources on all aspects of learning.

Institute for Academic Development

SHCA Peer Support

Approaching the dissertation

Dissertation. A big word, and often a scary one. Alfie, a Student Ambassador, looks at ways to make it slightly less intimidating.

Perhaps the culmination of your time at university and exceptional (circumstances notwithstanding), also the longest piece of academic writing you will have created to date. Sounds like a lot – and let's not mince words, it is a big

task and not one to be taken lightly. However, with the right preparation, forethought, and enthusiasm, it is as enjoyable a project as any other. It should represent the sum of your passions and interests that you have cultivated over your time studying, or perhaps afford you a chance to further explore areas you have not yet had the chance to investigate. Simply put, it is a fantastic opportunity to hit your stride as an aspiring academic, or to cap off your university experience.

When it comes to the dissertation, it is never too early to start planning. I'm not suggesting that you should be coming out of your first year lectures and taking an abundance of notes on potential topics and sources to use, rather if something grabs you early on, maybe it could be something worth considering for the future. If a particular topic, method, or concept catches your eye, take notes! Remember it for later, and by the time that third year rolls around and the question is being asked, you'll have some ideas for what you've got planned.

It is worth bearing in mind that third year is an optimal time to start your planning, especially over the summer break. At this point in your studies you will have likely covered a great deal of content and – hopefully – will have found something you enjoy writing about. If this is the case, take notes from any courses you have around the subject area and try to explore them. Consolidate reading lists, discuss material with suitable academics, and read around the subject if you have time. Naturally, this isn't something that you need to have done by the first day of fourth year, but it's something worth preparing if you have the time to spare. In addition, try to identify an appropriate member of academic staff to act as your dissertation supervisor – someone who is ideally familiar with the topic, so that you can discuss ideas accordingly.

Writing the dissertation is a separate beast and surprisingly manageable if you like to break things down into sections. A

dissertation will often have a literature review that examines contemporary academic thought on a topic and is not too dissimilar from discussions of readings done for seminars. This is often a large portion of your dissertation, so be sure you're comfortable doing the reading to follow through. Other key chapters are your introduction where you'll outline your subject, structure, and points for consideration, and your discussion, where you can make a deep dive into the content, highlighting your own ideas and opinions, as supported by or in opposition to existing thought. Be sure to give ample time for the writing of all this, as it can seem quite demanding, but rest assured that you'll be able to intersperse this with meetings with your supervisor who can discuss your progress.

When it comes down to it, the dissertation is quite a big process, but one to (hopefully) be enjoyed. The freedom to pursue your own academic interests and supplement your own research with the aid of university professionals is a great opportunity to develop your own researching capability, perseverance, and self-motivation, all desirable and transferable skills for postgraduate study and beyond. While it is a big challenge, it is one that you're not undertaking alone, as all other undergraduates will be in the same boat as you. So don't worry, do your best, and remember to engage with the stuff you're passionate about – it's all plain sailing from there.

Top tips for exams

One of our students, Sarah, gives us the lowdown on surviving exams.

As a student, exams are inevitable: some courses only require

in-term coursework, but most have a final exam to test your learning through the semester. As a fourth year I've gone through many exams and have developed my ideal system for dealing with them. This is my list of top tips for exams, based on what has helped me through these four years.

Revision

There is no denying that revision is stressful, especially when exams are early or come closely together. What comes first is figuring out where you can revise best. I personally like to find a good café where there is some background noise and lots of coffee and snacks, however, others might prefer the library, various other university buildings, revising in accommodation, or revising from home. Even if you prefer to move around to revise, I'd recommend finding some reliable spaces where you can work well and sticking with them.

Once you've found your revision space, the work itself is the next step. Over the years, most of my courses have been composed of a number of different and distinct topics, with exam questions relating to these individual topics. It's usually best to revise a few of these topics rather than the entire course, to build greater depth of knowledge in particular areas. Always make sure to ask your lecturer for advice on how to best revise, and how many topics you should learn for the exam.

Relaxation

Revision is important, but you should also allow time to relax and wind down. I have a bad habit of overworking and getting very stressed, particularly with essays and exams, and have had to force myself to stop working after I've done a certain amount or if it's getting too late in the evening. In exam time you have to take care of yourself – eat well, don't overdo the coffee, make sure to get enough sleep (I've found apps like Sleep Stories and Slumber are good for distracting me from overthinking), and try not to overdo it. Make time to

talk to your friends and flatmates, as they'll all be feeling the stress too. It's important to get work done, but it's just as important to keep yourself feeling OK, relieve some stress, and remember, especially, to take a break after an exam if you have another soon after. It's good to do well but not if you're sacrificing your physical or mental health to do so.

In the exam

The next step is the exam itself. Always remember to take plenty of pens, a highlighter can be useful, and definitely remember a watch in case your seat doesn't have a clock nearby. Take your time and read the questions carefully (everyone tells you to do this but it's definitely important!), and try to decide on both essay questions early so when you go back to the second your brain has had a chance to come up with an answer. Before writing, it is always useful to sketch out a plan – even just a basic structure for the answer – that you can go back to when you are writing, to help yourself out later. With two hours for two essays, I take five minutes for each essay to plan its structure, then around ten minutes per paragraph, and any spare time to reread my answers. This may not work for some, but it has done well for me so far!

Essay writing

Everything you ever wanted to know about essays but were afraid to ask by Student Ambassador Constance.

Essay writing, love it or hate it, it is the metric by which we students are measured. Figuring out your 'style' is something of a journey and will inevitably include some painful marks to grow as a writer. However, there are some

tips I can offer, distilled from my four years of successes and failures, to help demystify the approach to essay writing.

Picking a topic – Don't go for the obvious and easy. This can be hard, especially if you are pressed for time. But the reality is a lot of people are going to go for the obvious and easy, especially if you are in a big course. It will only make it harder for you to stand out amidst the fifty other people who picked the same question.

Picking a topic Part 2 – Pick a topic you like. If you like a subject more, chances are you are going to try harder and, dare I say, enjoy the process of researching more. Better yet, if you have the opportunity to pick a question, go for it. It is a perfect opportunity to focus on what *you* enjoy.

Research – Get your ducks in a row. Do not cut corners, I repeat, do not cut corners. This is when you want to be organized and systematic. Make sure you are clear when you take notes and have noted who said what. I still get cold sweats thinking about running to the library at 3 am because I could not figure out which book I had taken a quote from.

Research – Be one with the source. If you are using primary sources, it is best to have a direct quotation so that you ensure you have not lost any of the original source's meaning, especially if it is literary in nature.

Writing – (When you can) Take bite size pieces. Inevitably, there will be a time where you write an essay in a day. Afterwards, you will feel groggy, gross and your brain's IQ will have depreciated to the value of a guinea pig until you have had a full 8 hours of rest. Some people can function perfectly under these circumstances – if you are one of them, Godspeed my friend – but most are not. My best essays were slow burners where I took time to make a really pretty and detailed outline and only wrote a maximum of 500-1000 words per day.

Editing – Take some time and then go for it. Essays are like boyfriends or girlfriends; sometimes you just need a little space. Give yourself a day or two to avoid your essay and then go to a printer, print that baby out, grab a pen and read it aloud. Yep, read it like it is the Queen's Speech and cringe at the sound of your own voice. It the most useful tip a lecturer from first year gave me, and by far the most surefire way to catch grammar mistakes.

Submit – Get the receipts. Chances are you will be submitting your essay online via Turnitin. For all that is good and holy, no matter how tired you may be, check your email to make sure you got a receipt confirming your submission. Nothing is worse than losing marks for an essay you thought you submitted on time.

What is perhaps the most important thing is not to be dismayed if you do not get the mark you want. Read the feedback and take it to heart when you go to write the next one.