

Preparing for A Levels

When I first started A levels, fresh out of GCSEs, I did not expect it to be such a HUGE jump. I was one of the lucky ones where at GCSE things clicked and everything made sense and therefore studying wasn't a tedious task. But when it came to A levels, there are no short cuts.

I wish I had someone to tell me about the journey I was embarking on. There have been plenty of good times as well as bad, and my experiences are very similar to many others out there. Therefore, I am writing this short guide to ease you into your first year of A levels be it at sixth form or at college. I hope this manual helps you prepare in some way for the next stage in your adventure because my friends and I were so unprepared for what came next.

I wish you luck on your journey and hope you're one of the ones who know what to expect!

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The TRUTH

A Level is HARD. No matter what subjects you are studying, the work load is immense. It will take time to adjust, but you CAN do it. By the end of the two years, you will be looking forward to the next step, and it will all be worth it.

In GCSEs you do lots of different subjects, in A levels you only do 4 or 5, but content is more. In GCSEs you have more time to relax, more time to have fun, but in A levels everything suddenly becomes serious and stressful. You won't get six weeks to revise for exams, but a week or two at best. You'll have to go away and learn things yourself as the pace is fast and what you do in one lesson may not be covered in the next.

However, there are ways to make the process of A levels easier. Time management is key. Invest in a diary if need be.

The rest of this guide will tell you how.

Studying

If you're lucky, you'll get an hour of free time every day if you're at sixth form. At college you'll have to monitor your own time, and you'll have to be strict with yourself. It is so easy to fall behind, to one day say you'll do something tomorrow, and before you know it, everything builds up. Use your free time to get any homework done, to make sure your notes are complete, to make sure your folders are in order, to make sure you understand what you're doing in lessons. This last one you can do by tracking down your teacher outside teaching hours for extra help or talking to people doing the same subject as you either in an older year or in your year. Anything you don't get done in school, make sure you get it done in the evening.

It's also important to have a study-life balance, so don't work yourself too hard, but don't put off your work either. It's important to stay on top of things from the beginning.

Extra-Curricular Activities

If you decide to work alongside studying, the recommended maximum hours of work is eight hours a week. Even then, you're cutting into your social time and it becomes a massive juggling ball. Unless you absolutely need to, it's best not to work during A levels unless you have supreme balancing skills that allows you to stay on top of things, have fun and work.

In preparation for your personal statement/CV you may also want to do voluntary work. It's best to dedicate an hour a week, or volunteer somewhere for three days straight during your holidays. Universities don't care about quantity, but quality. What did you learn during your time volunteering? What skills have you gained? Look at your local charities and local shops.

Sport is also good for you, so make sure you get some exercise during the week!

Year 1 vs Year 2

Don't kid yourself into thinking you'll take it easy in year 1 and work hard in year 2. You need to work hard from the word go. The better you do in year 1, the less stressful year 2 will be. Also, universities, apprenticeships, colleges and any other further courses, look at your AS results. They base their offers on how well you do in your first year. Therefore it is mandatory you do your absolute best in year 1.

Anything can happen in year 2. You might not understand an entire module, exams don't go as well as you thought, and exam boundaries may get higher. Therefore you

can't hedge your bets. Go through year 1 as if it's the year that counts – because it does in so many ways.

Exams

When it comes to exams, exam papers are the best. I personally found it helpful to get the specification for each of my subjects and make notes from there. Specifications tell you exactly what you need to know – in some cases exact phrases and in others, the key concepts. This may eliminate half of the content of your text books. The next thing to do is exam questions. Timing is important, as is knowing where to pick up marks. Marks are often awarded for key words or key steps. Know where these marks are and learn them.

If you have to write essays, learn the key facts: dates, names, conclusions. Look at perfect answers and tackle lots of essay questions.

Ask people who have done the subject for advice, and seek a tutor if you need extra help.

Teachers are more than happy to support you so do contact them for help.

Final Word

A levels can be stressful, but you can also do it and get the grades you want. You may find it emotionally challenging: being in a new environment with new people, or being surrounded by people you don't get on with, finding the work overbearing, difficulties at home, hormones all over the place – this is normal. Talk to someone you trust, or approach someone you trust to be directed on for further help. I myself found A levels particularly challenging as I was diagnosed with depression at the beginning of year 13 after a few years of struggling, but I got through it and went on to do medicine at Kings College London. No matter how tough it gets, you can see it through.

Believe in yourself, and once you're out the other end, it will be worth it.

Good luck.