



## Freshman-Year Do's and Don'ts: Starting College Strong

Your freshman year is a time of discovery. You will encounter new people, new ideas, greater independence, and academic challenges that can help you grow. The transition may occasionally feel overwhelming, but you do not have to arrive on campus knowing how to handle everything. College is a learning experience in more ways than one.

Success is seldom about being perfect from the first day. It is more often the result of developing good habits, asking for help, making thoughtful choices, and adjusting when something is not working. The following do's and don'ts can help you begin college with confidence.

### Do Enjoy College Life—but Keep Your Balance

The social side of college is part of the experience. Campus activities, friendships, clubs, athletics, and dormitory life can create lasting memories and help you feel that you belong.

The key is to enjoy those opportunities without allowing them to take control of your schedule. During the first few weeks, it may appear that little work is due. However, reading assignments, notes, and unfinished tasks can accumulate quickly.

**Do create a healthy balance between socializing and studying.** Attend events, meet people, and make friends, but reserve specific times for your academic work. If you are naturally outgoing, put that strength to good use. Invite compatible classmates to form a study group, compare notes, or prepare for an upcoming exam.

**Don't make every social invitation an obligation.** Learning to say “not tonight” is part of managing your independence. There will always be another activity, but an important deadline may not offer a second chance.

## Do Expect College Courses to Challenge You

Students who earned excellent grades in high school can still be surprised by the pace of college classes. Professors may cover more material in less time, assign substantial reading, and expect students to work independently outside the classroom.

This does not mean that you are unprepared or do not belong. It simply means that the methods that worked in high school may need to be strengthened.

**Don't assume that a familiar subject will require little effort.** Begin assignments early, review your notes regularly, and pay attention to the expectations listed in each course syllabus.

**Do treat academic skills as abilities you can improve.** Note-taking, research, writing, test preparation, and critical reading all develop through practice. A disappointing grade can be useful information. It can show you where to change your approach before the next assignment.

## Do Ask for Help Early

One of the most important lessons in college is that seeking help is a strength, not an admission of failure. Successful students use the resources available to them.

Colleges commonly offer:

- Academic advising
- Tutoring programs
- Writing and math centers
- Library research assistance
- Counseling and wellness services
- Disability and accessibility services
- Career and major-exploration programs
- Peer mentoring and study groups

Your professors and teaching assistants are also valuable resources. Attend office hours, ask focused questions, and explain what you have already tried. You do not need to wait until you are in serious difficulty.

**Don't disappear when you are confused.** Missing class or avoiding an instructor usually makes a manageable problem feel larger.

**Do reach out as soon as you notice a pattern.** If you repeatedly misunderstand the material, fall behind, or feel unable to concentrate, make one appointment. That single step can lead to practical solutions and renewed confidence.

## **Do Explore Your Major Thoughtfully**

Some students enter college with a clear career goal. Others need time to explore. Both situations are normal.

**Don't choose a major solely because someone else expects it, because it sounds prestigious, or because you believe you must decide immediately.** Your introductory courses may reveal abilities and interests you have never had an opportunity to explore.

At the same time, waiting indefinitely can create scheduling problems, especially in programs with long course sequences.

**Do learn about your options early.** Meet with an academic adviser, investigate degree requirements, take introductory courses, attend departmental events, and speak with students or professionals in fields that interest you. Find out when your college requires you to declare a major so that exploration becomes a deliberate process rather than a source of delay.

Choosing a direction does not require knowing every detail of your future. It means making the best informed decision you can with what you currently know.

## **Do Manage Your Time With a Weekly Plan**

College gives you more control over your schedule, but it also gives you more responsibility for how you use it. Classes occupy only part of the week. Reading, writing, research, practice, and exam preparation must be completed outside the classroom.

**Do use a calendar or planner to record every important date.** At the beginning of the term, transfer deadlines from each syllabus into one place. Include exams, papers, presentations, registration dates, work hours, appointments, and personal commitments.

Each week, decide:

- What must be completed
- Which assignments will require several work sessions
- When you will study
- When you will rest and socialize
- Where you have left room for unexpected events

**Don't rely on motivation alone.** A regular study routine is more dependable than waiting until you feel inspired.

Instead of trying to complete a major assignment in one sitting, divide it into smaller steps: choose a topic, locate sources, create an outline, write a draft, revise, and proofread. Progress feels much more manageable when the next action is clear.

## **Do Put First Things First**

Looking at an entire semester's workload can feel intimidating. The solution is not to ignore future responsibilities, but neither is it helpful to worry about all of them at once.

**Do look ahead, prioritize, and then focus on the task in front of you.** Ask yourself:

- 1 What is due first?
- 2 What will take the most preparation?
- 3 Which task has the greatest effect on my grade?
- 4 What small step can I complete now?

**Don't allow every unfinished task to compete for your attention.** Constantly switching among assignments can leave all of them half finished. Select a priority, work on it for a defined period, take a short break, and then continue or move deliberately to the next task.

## **Do Take Care of the Student, Not Just the Schedule**

Academic performance is connected to physical and emotional well-being. Sleep, nutrition, movement, relationships, and mental health affect concentration and judgment.

**Don't treat exhaustion as proof that you are working hard enough.** Repeated all-night study sessions usually signal that the schedule or study method needs to change.

**Do build routines that help you remain steady.** Get adequate sleep, eat regularly, move your body, and make time for people and activities that restore your energy. If stress becomes difficult to manage, contact a campus counselor, adviser, healthcare provider, or another trusted person.

## **Do Give Yourself Time to Adjust**

Not every day will feel successful. You may earn a grade that disappoints you, feel homesick, question your major, or need time to find your group of friends. These experiences do not mean that your college journey is failing.

**Don't turn one difficult week into a prediction about your future.**

**Do pause, identify the problem, and choose the next useful step.** That may mean changing a study habit, meeting with a professor, joining a campus organization, reducing a commitment, or asking someone for support.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 77 percent of first-time, full-time students who began at degree-granting institutions in fall 2021 returned the following fall; at four-year institutions, the rate was 81 percent. These figures are more encouraging than the older claim that one in four freshmen simply “drop out,” and they remind us that student experiences differ by institution and circumstances.

## **A Strong Start Is Built One Decision at a Time**

Freshman-year success does not depend on avoiding every mistake. It depends on noticing what you need, using the resources around you, and continuing to make constructive choices.

Enjoy the social life of college, but protect your study time. Expect to be challenged, but remember that skills can improve. Explore your interests thoughtfully, ask for assistance early, and take care of your well-being along the way.

Completing a degree can also expand career opportunities. In 2024, workers age 25 and older with a bachelor’s degree had higher median weekly earnings and a lower unemployment rate than workers whose highest credential was a high school diploma. Individual outcomes vary by occupation, location, experience, and many other factors, but education continues to be associated with meaningful economic advantages.

College is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity. Approach your freshman year with curiosity, balance, and the willingness to seek support. You do not have to master the entire journey at once. You only need to keep taking the next productive step.