

Academics 101

How to have a positive experience and get good grades at university

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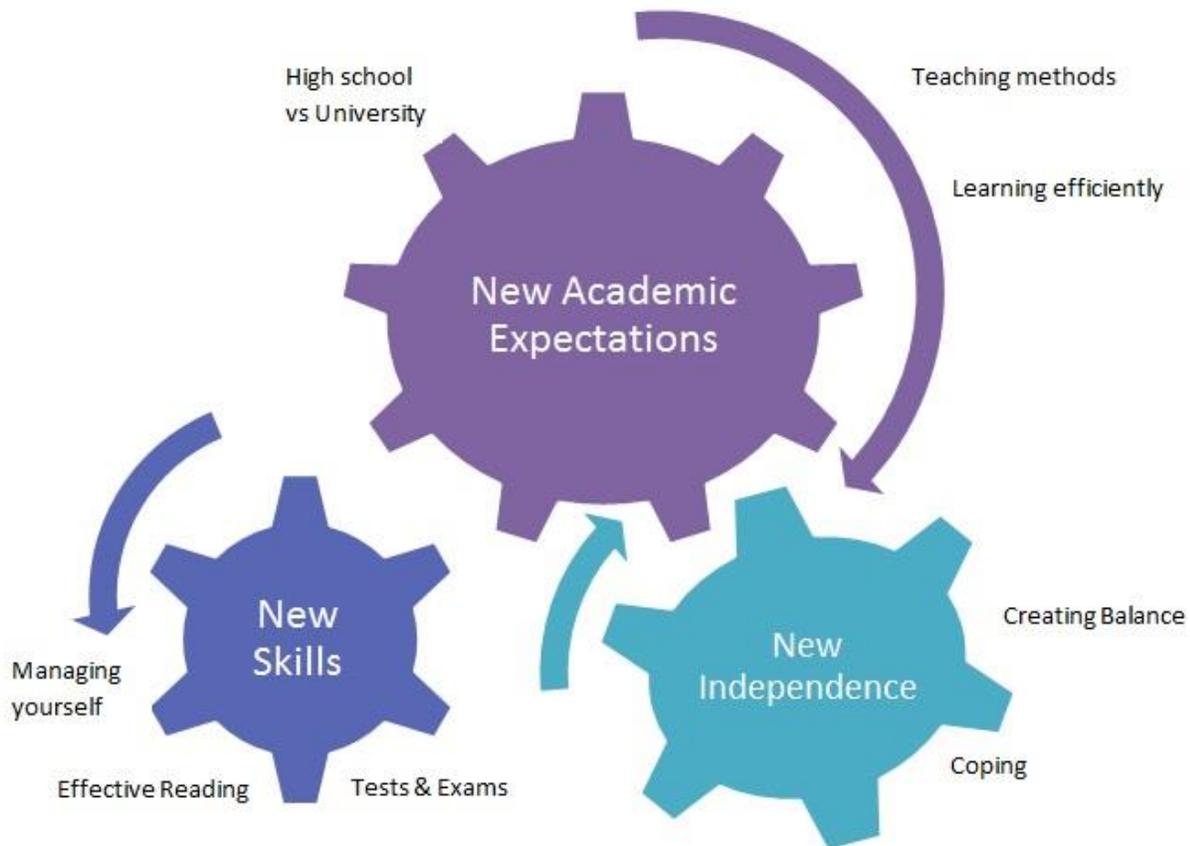
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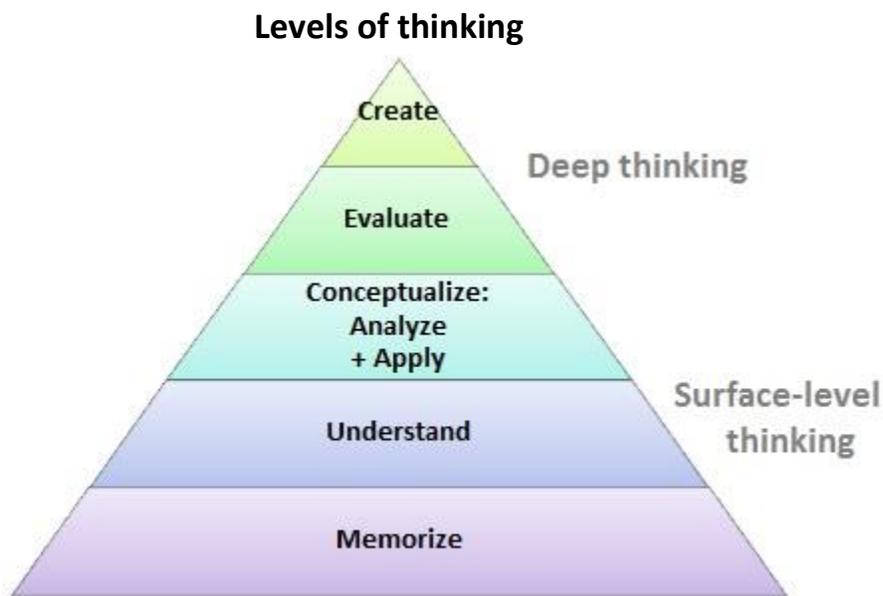
Student Academic Success Services: Learning Strategies and the Writing Centre

Welcome to Queen's! Congratulations on making the leap into university life. University requires new approaches to thinking, writing and studying—even for the most qualified entrants. You'll learn complex material at a rapid pace even as you take responsibility for your own learning and life decisions. In order to make the most of your education, you'll need to develop new skills and manage that independence.



In what ways are you expected to think at university?

Generally speaking, in high school you earned high grades primarily through participation, memorizing facts and some integration of more complicated material. At university, the assumption is that you can memorize, and the professor wants to know if you can **use** your knowledge by applying or analyzing data or ideas. From the very first weeks, you will have to make and justify judgments about complex information. A useful model of thinking is described in Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning (2002):



Conceptual thinking is the goal. Although many first-year courses call for you to memorize facts, theories and definitions, most of your grades will come from your ability to show you can **apply** ideas in new contexts, demonstrate **how ideas connect**, **analyze** arguments and proofs, or compare and contrast different theoretical approaches. As you progress at university, you will be asked to challenge, apply and perhaps even create new theories. This type of thinking requires the ability to deal with ambiguities in fact and argumentation: there may be no single right answer in many questions you deal with.

How can you shift between different levels of thinking?

The chart below describes some ways to think more deeply. Each level of thinking builds directly from the previous one. The strategies you choose should reflect the type of material that you need to learn (e.g., memorize the procedures to analyze a blood sample; describe the social impact of various political movements; compare and contrast theories of personality) and will likely involve more than one thinking level.

Student Academic Success Services:

Learning Strategies and the Writing Centre



Thinking level	Activities that support this thinking level	Specific strategies
Memorizing	Repeat, recite, do practice questions, self-test.	Make cue cards; read content more than once (try our reading strategies to save time). Test yourself on facts or details using questions that start with “define,” “list,” or “identify.”
Understanding	Paraphrase, look for relationships or connections among ideas.	Add your own definition to cue cards; write short lecture summaries . Self-test using questions that start with “explain” or “describe.”
Conceptual thinking (analyzing, applying)	Analyze the nature of the relationships identified at the “understanding” level. Summarize concepts within an organizing structure. Apply a theory to a problem.	Make mind maps , charts, or math problem concept summaries . Self-test using questions that start with “solve,” “apply,” “analyze,” “compare,” “contrast,” “prove,” or “justify.” Write thoughtful responses to questions that start with “how?”
Evaluative thinking	Look for implications or consequences of the relationships analyzed at the “conceptual” level. Assess the assumptions & logic of an argument, and data/research implications, to form judgments about conflicting data or theories.	Participate in discussion groups; examine practice cases; write thoughtful responses to questions that start with “why?”

Ask yourself whether you are doing homework and studying that helps you learn deeply. Memorizing is necessary, but deeper conceptual thinking is the goal. Stop and think:

- What does this material mean?
- Does it connect to other things we’ve been learning?
- How can I use this information?
- What’s the SO WHAT or significance of this chapter or unit or concept?
- How might this be applied?
- How could I organize and condense it?

When you pay attention to the level of thinking you are practicing, and always try to go deeper, you will prepare yourself for the type of questions your professor may ask you on exams or in class discussions.

New academic expectations

Now that you know where you're headed conceptually, we'll show you how to get there through effective and evidence-based study habits. You are now responsible for **directing your own learning**: you will have to schedule your own time to complete assignments, readings and other tasks, like quizzes, so that you are prepared for class.

Roughly speaking, students in all faculties and programs should estimate about **8-10 hours per week for each 3-unit course**. This estimate includes **all** activities: lectures, labs, readings, assignments, homework problems, groups work, and quizzes. Studying for tests or exams is on top of these hours, and many students spend 10-20 hours studying for mid-year and final exams. That means that a useful rule of thumb is to think of university as a full-time job: it'll take you about 40 hours a week, sometimes a bit more. How ought you to divide and use that time?

Managing your time and yourself

University presents a wonderful opportunity to grow, explore, create and meet new people. Balancing new opportunities, school work and healthy living is often challenging, but missing out on one of these elements can lead to a dissatisfying year.

Maintaining your physical health and a positive outlook by eating well, sleeping enough (7-9 hours a night is the average requirement for a young adult), and exercising will help keep you motivated for school. See our [time management](#) tools for more help.

Balancing the workload across all your courses

Often students find the biggest challenge is **getting the work done** in all their courses, and having time for eating, sleeping, relaxing and socializing.

Each course may have multiple weekly quizzes and assignments, in addition to the regular readings, problem-sets and homework. Sometimes you may fall behind, but knowing **what** is due **when** and how many **marks** the assignment is worth are important so you can make good choices about how you use your time.

You will need to find a way to keep track of commitments and homework time, which works for you. A learning strategies advisor will be happy to help you with this, or you can use these three tools:

- To Do List
- [Weekly Schedule](#) (fillable PDF)
- [Term Planner](#)

Studying, learning and class time

Class time

While students might imagine that university teaching is comprised exclusively of lectures in large groups, courses are delivered using various teaching methods, including lectures, a blend of lecture and online delivery, and fully online delivery. Frequently, tutorials—small-group discussions led by a graduate student Teaching Assistant—and labs—practical experiences for science students—complement lectures and give you a chance to practice or debate ideas introduced in lectures or out-of-class readings.

Regardless of the amount of contact time you have with professors, you'll need to do plenty of work both in class and beyond the lecture hall or tutorial room:

- **Prepare for class** by skimming through lecture slides posted online and reading the required materials, familiarizing yourself with important concepts along the way.
- **Go to the scheduled classes**, or plan regular learning time each week for online courses.
- **Learn to [take notes](#)** or modify printed PowerPoint slides in lectures, labs and during group work.
- **Write a brief synopsis of the lecture, lab or tutorial** in your *own* words, to capture the big picture: “*What was this class about?*” Write a few sentences to summarize the main ideas or topics shortly after class, and review it before the following class and while working on assignments and reading.

Efficient learners also:

- **do homework:** the content is complex, and there is a lot of material to be learned.
- **keep up:** The pace is fast and constant.
- **engage and think:** your professors may seem distant, but they want to help. Ask for help if you don't understand. Cultivate curiosity.
- **pay attention:** manage external distractions by putting your phone out of sight and on silent during work time. Try using site-blocking software.

Assignments, essays & homework

Separate your *learning* from your *studying*.

When we learn, we acquire, understand and apply information. The key activity in learning is **thinking**. In contrast, studying improves memory retention and retrieval, and involves **practice** and **self-testing**.

Students sometimes overlap their learning and their studying, usually right before an exam (a.k.a. cramming). While they might pass the exam, they will probably have neither good understanding nor

good recall of the course for later use (in a final exam, or in later courses that build on content from previous courses). Cramming isn't effective and isn't much fun.

Ideally, you should spread out your learning over the term so you can make associations and connections between ideas or theories or applications, and then focus on studying before a test or exam. Think of studying as first practicing the material and skills that you've already learned, and then testing yourself to see what you understand well, and what you need to review.

Why is it helpful to separate your learning from your studying?

- **Clear purpose.** When you sit down to do work, you will be more focused and understand the purpose of your work. Ask yourself: "What am I trying to do? Am I trying to understand this new material or am I trying to practice/memorize it?"
- **Improved understanding.** Learning as you go means you will understand fundamental material more fully, and then be ready for more complex content. Many professors teach by building on previous lessons, so it's a good idea to learn in gradual steps.
- **Avoid cramming.** When you spread your learning over days or weeks during the term, you can avoid cramming for exams during study period. You can focus your studying on improving your depth of connections, application and analysis thinking, and speed and accuracy in math-type courses.

How to use homework time

Here is a summary of how you should use your homework time. For more information, including how much time to spend on each activity, please see [How to use homework time](#).

- Preview main concepts, lecture slides, lab instructions or readings before the next day's lectures/labs/tutorials
- Review and summarize notes or slides from that day's lectures
- Complete assignments (problem sets, readings, etc.)

Reading & writing skills

Lectures are generally an *introduction* to a given topic, rather than everything you'll need to know about it. The majority of your learning will be done **outside** of class. Most students will be asked to read academic articles, scholarly books, and textbooks for each lecture and/or tutorial.

Why are readings important? Reading at university is a fundamental way of obtaining information on the facts, theories and discussions involved in any subject. Academics in all disciplines from English to Engineering to Economics communicate and debate with each other in writing, so to understand what's going on in a discipline, you'll need to learn to read in a new way – and fast, since you'll have to read a lot of material! Often, professors and teaching assistants will begin class with the assumption

that you have already read that week's reading, so if you don't do it, you may struggle to understand what's happening in class.

How can you improve your reading skills?

Ask yourself:

- What is the purpose of this reading assignment? How does this reading tie in with the course overall?
- Am I reading this journal article to get an overview of a research procedure?
- Am I reading the text to learn new terms and concepts?
- Am I reading the novel to be able to discuss themes and writing techniques?
- Am I reading the pre-lab material to understand the procedures I'll follow in the lab?

The *timing* of when you read will depend in part on the purpose of the reading. For example, in traditional lecture courses, if the professor lectures on the key ideas in the text, you might try skimming the chapter before class, and then read more thoroughly after the lecture. It usually takes less time to read after a class, because you can focus on what you didn't understand during class.

For strategies to increase your reading effectiveness, visit the [online resources about Reading and Note-making](#).

Writing skills

University-level writing is an essential skill. You are expected to be capable of expressing yourself clearly and logically in English using correct grammar, and to become better at expressing an argument or systematic procedure over time. Think of your written assignments as your chance to demonstrate what you've learned in a course.

Writing in university is quite different from writing in high school, and it takes much more time. Students are often surprised that they can't write good-quality papers in a day or two, but must take a week or two to write (in addition to the time needed for research), and revise more than one draft, to produce what their professors expect.

Undergraduates and graduate students use **the Writing Centre at SASS** is heavily used by undergraduates and graduate students for free [consultations](#) with professional writers or trained upper-year students. You can develop skills such as generating ideas for a paper, working with an outline or early draft, refining a thesis statement, strengthening an argument and writing more clearly and concisely. You can also check out our [popular series of tips on academic writing](#).

When it's time to **research** a paper, go to a [librarian](#) for help. Each academic department has a [liaison librarian and there are research resources](#) for most departments.

Many resources are also available online through the [Writing Centre](#). Credit courses in writing are also available through [Continuing and Distance Studies](#).

Group work

Common across all subjects, group work can be challenging if students have different understandings of the assignment, different work styles, or different personal goals.

You're more likely to have positive group work experiences if you and your group members:

- **are organized and communicate well**
 - discuss and agree on the goal, assignment, or purpose of the group. What are you supposed to do?
 - look at the timeframes, and set a reasonable working schedule to meet the deadline.
 - settle where and when will you meet. Make choices that are realistic and respectful of everyone's needs.
 - talk about expectations for attending group meetings, and what might happen if members are always late, don't do their part of the work, or drop away entirely. At what point might the group talk to the professor for guidance?
- **break the project down** into small tasks, and decide when each should be done.
- **assign tasks appropriately**
 - talk about what each person is good at, and also what new skills members might want to learn in the process
 - talk about personal work styles, and how some people might be a better fit for some tasks than others.
- **choose your battles.** Avoid big blow-ups within the group by talking together about what is working well and what is not. Solve small disagreements as they come up. Some of the lessons in group work include how to cooperate, share responsibility, solve problems and maintain a sense of humour.



Tests and exams

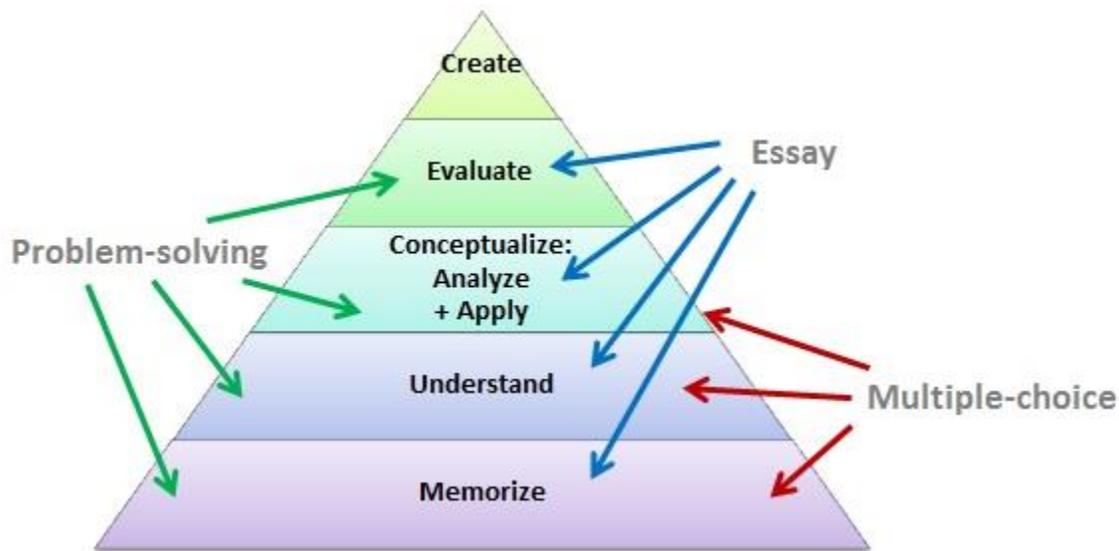
Tests and exams can be challenging, but planning ahead and learning how to study effectively definitely helps. **Start by** reading the learning objectives in the course syllabus, in the lecture slides, or in handouts. They often indicate what is most important to know in the course.

The **goal** of most tests is to assess your ability to use your knowledge by applying or analyzing the key ideas. Re-reading or re-writing notes won't be enough; you should also summarize themes in an organized structure so you can identify similarities and differences, understand relationships among concepts, do practice problems, drill, and self-test.

Exams can have different **formats**, including multiple choice, short answer, essay, quantitative problem-solving, or image recognition (e.g., slides in Anatomy or paintings in Art History). SASS [exam prep tips](#) suggest strategies helpful for each type of format.

Multiple choice exams are very common and they can tap application and analysis questions in addition to facts and details. Don't be surprised by "solve" or "compare and contrast" questions on a multiple choice style exam!

Exam questions tap different levels of thinking



Your midterm exams may be spread out over several weeks, and during midterm season it's not unusual to get behind in regular course work. Make a plan to distribute your review over several study sessions, so you don't get too far behind in other courses. For December and April exams, see the [two-step study plan method](#).

Online tests and quizzes are very common, and might have a different format in each course. Ask the professor or read the course syllabus to learn about the quiz's logistics and structure.

For strategies on preparing for and writing exams, visit [our online resources on exam prep](#). For information about online exams or quizzes, see our [online learning resource](#).

How does the grading system work?

Students are graded on a percentage scale (0-100%). Grades above 90% are exceedingly rare—even the best students may never receive them, so don't be alarmed if your high school average appears to drop.

Your course scores will be averaged into a Grade Point Average (GPA) system, which has a range of 0.0 to 4.3 (4.3 corresponds to x% etc.). Depending on faculty regulations, students are expected to maintain a minimum cumulative GPA across all courses to progress in good standing.

You should become familiar with the regulations for your faculty. Within every faculty, there is an appeal process that students can use, depending on their circumstances, to challenge decisions based on the academic regulations. Speak with an academic advisor from your faculty for more information.

Understanding academic integrity

Academic integrity means **the practice of honest and responsible scholarship**. It's a key part of everything we do at university. Plagiarism occurs most commonly when someone uses the words, thoughts, products or designs of another person without permission or giving credit. Queen's, like all universities, takes academic integrity very seriously. You should know that **you are responsible** for understanding and practicing academic integrity.

[Two of the most common reasons](#) why students violate academic integrity are **poor time management** and **lack of knowledge**, both of which can be overcome with a little effort. SASS can help you with both topics; we offer a variety of resources, from workshops to online resources to one-on-one consultations. Plagiarism and other aspects of academic integrity [are explained in detail here](#).

Helpful resources

What if I need more help with my courses?

Queen's wants you to enjoy your courses and have a successful year, and there are many resources to help you meet your goals.

Some resources include:

- your teaching assistant (TA), lab assistant or professor. Don't be afraid to ask questions; they're eager to help!
- SASS [workshops](#), [online resources](#) and [appointments](#)
- faculty-specific tutoring programs—ask at department offices or see our [subject-specific resource guide](#)
- a voluntary [Bounce Back](#) mentor program

Feeling overwhelmed?

There will be times when you won't be on top of your work, or aren't able to do everything to 100% of your ability, or aren't feeling healthy or balanced. This is common. Learning to make wise and strategic choices is part of being an efficient student, and nobody gets it right straight away or all of the time.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, you can try to:

- do something you enjoy, to relax and de-stress
- follow some of the familiar routines from home, such as bedtimes and eating times

- talk to a friend or family member for some encouragement
- make a to-do list and break big tasks into small manageable steps
- write down your concerns and think about your options for each
- talk to a professor or TA to clarify an assignment, to see if your assignment is on the right track, or to get an idea of the focus of a reading
- use campus resources such as [Student Wellness Services](#), [QUIC](#), [Accessibility Services](#), your don or other [Res Life](#) staff, [Four Directions Indigenous Student Centre](#), the [Faith and Spiritual Life office](#), and [Student Academic Success Services](#)
- see your faculty academic advisor in the general administration area of the faculty office. Go to the 1st floor of Dunning Hall for Arts & Science Advising, or the 1st floor of Goodes Hall for Commerce, or Student Services in Beamish-Munroe Hall for Engineering Advising.

The first six weeks at university

Week One

- Check my mindset: I'm in charge of my success at university.
- Figure out where my classes are, and go to all of them.
- Read the syllabus for each of my classes. Keep it for quick reference.
- Transfer important dates and deadlines from course syllabi to my [term calendar](#).
- Get my textbooks and course packs.
- Check my courses on onQ.
- Start right away on course [readings](#), [problem sets](#), and assignments; work builds up quickly.
- Use my time between classes to get schoolwork done, so I can relax later.
- Estimate how much time I'll need to give to each course, and make [a weekly schedule](#) that includes time for work, sleep, extra-curricular activities, fun, and relaxation.

Week Two

- Check my @queensu.ca e-mail account for important messages from Queen's.
- Visit my professors' office hours to introduce myself.
- Get to know other students in my classes. See if anyone wants to start a study group.
- Find a study space where I can get work done.
- Review my [weekly schedule](#): is it working? Are there things I should change?
- Are there courses I need to add or drop? Look up the [deadline](#).
- Go to a [SASS workshop](#) or sign up for a consultation with a [learning strategies advisor](#).
- Look into ways to get involved on campus.
- Be open to new experiences, but stay connected with my family and old friends.
- Get enough sleep (7-9 hours / night) and get into a routine that works for me.

Week Three

- Keep going to all my classes so I'm not caught off guard at midterms.
- Set up study groups with some motivated classmates.
- Keep up with course work. Do my weekly [readings](#) or [problem sets](#) before lectures, read my lab instructions before going to the lab, preview my lecture notes or slides before the lectures.
- Use my time between classes to do school work.
- Get help from my prof or TA when I get stuck, or make an [appointment](#) at SASS.

Week Four

- See what assignments are due soon, and start planning them with the [Assignment Calculator](#).
- Get some friendly feedback on my writing—make an appointment with [a writing consultant](#) or [a peer writing assistant](#).
- Check out the advice on [exam prep](#) at SASS.

Week Five

- If I'm behind in my course work, check out the [SASS peer blog posts](#) (like [Playing Catch Up](#) or [Dear first-year me...](#)) or book a learning strategies [appointment](#).
- Get ready for midterms by picking up [some study tips](#) and blocking off time in my weekly schedule to study, eat, and sleep.
- Visit [Student Wellness Services](#) for healthy tips.
- Stay in touch with my family and friends to help me handle stress.

Week Six

- Reflect on my experiences so far: What's going well and not so well? Are things going the way I'd hoped they would? What do I want to change?
- Use my resources if I could use some help:
 - my Don
 - [Student Wellness Services](#)
 - [SASS](#)
 - [Other resources from Student Affairs](#).

Welcome to Queen's University! We are glad you are here. We want you to have a great first year. Just ask if you want help!