Study Focus 1

How to survive A Level Geography

So, you’ve got your GCSE Geography under your belt and now it’s time to take your learning to the next stage. Geography’s an interesting subject and that’s why you’ve picked it – but many people are a little apprehensive about embarking on their time at sixth form or college. You might have heard stories about how much harder your A Levels will be compared with GCSEs. You may even have heard people say that their A Levels were harder than their Geography degree at university. Could this be true?

While A Levels in general are challenging and Geography is no exception, there are a number of ways in which you can prepare for the course to make it easier and to increase your chances of success – both inside and outside the classroom. First and foremost, remember that the exam board and the teachers delivering the course want your experience of Geography to be enjoyable. Put a lot of work in and you should get a lot out of it.

Attend lessons

Make sure you go to as many classes as you possibly can. This includes the timetabled sessions and any extra ones that are put on to catch up or for revision. To get a good understanding of the topics being covered, you have to be there to take part in the activities planned by your teacher. One of the major causes of underachievement is absence from lessons. Of course, people fall ill and there are real reasons for missing lessons. This cannot be helped and some people genuinely need time off. But arrange driving lessons and part-time work around your lessons. It is absolutely vital to keep absence to a minimum.

Do your homework

This is set for a reason, so make sure you allocate enough time to complete it to the best of your ability. Homework is designed to reinforce the learning you have experienced in class and give you a more detailed understanding of it. Students who repeatedly put a lot of effort into their homework are in a lot better position than those who come up with excuses week after week.

Manage your time well

This is all about organisation. Make sure that you have a thorough understanding of what work is due in and when you have to submit it. Don’t think that you’re too old to have a planner. Remember how invaluable a planner was when you were finishing your GCSEs. So don’t stop using one now. Successful businessmen and women write things down and plan them out, so you need to plan your time and deadlines as well.

Watch TV

We’re not talking about checking out the latest episodes of your favourite TV show, but you could learn things that will help you with Geography by watching some programmes. Geography is about issues affecting the world and these are covered every day on a range of different channels. You could start with Channel 4 News, Newsnight, Countryfile, Dispatches and Panorama. Keep an eye out for random documentaries that relate to your course too. And if you want a quick update about what’s going on, switch to BBC News 24.
Do your own reading
You may get handouts from your teacher, suggesting books that are useful to buy. That extra reading will improve your understanding of the topics. But your reading and research doesn’t have to stop there. To develop your understanding of world issues, you should also read a newspaper – not necessarily every word of The Times each day, but try to scan a quality newspaper at least once a week. There are sure to be geographical stories in there. Your school library probably gets newspapers, which will save you cash. Or you could set your home page to the BBC News website – a quick glance at the headlines will keep you aware of what’s going on.

Understand the exam
• Right from the start of the course, make sure you have a good understanding of the exam format. Know how long you will be given, how many questions you need to answer and which topics you will be covering.
• Be aware that the wording of A Level exam questions may be slightly different to GCSE. You may still be asked to explain and assess, but you may also come across questions that ask ‘to what extent…?’ Basically, this means the same as evaluate or assess, but it demands a more complex way of structuring the question.
• Whenever your teacher covers exam technique, make sure you are paying attention.
• Tips on how to answer A Level questions are clues on how to be successful. Make a list of top tips that you spot, such as if you are asked to define desertification, don’t use the word ‘desertification’ in the definition.
• Knowing how to get the marks is crucially important, so ask your teacher for a mark scheme and get to know what the examiners are looking for.

Do a little and often
Keeping on top of things often means doing them regularly rather than cramming it all in at the last minute. When it comes to homework, don’t let it build up. When you’re learning about current affairs, you’ll get more information from scanning a newspaper twice a week than reading it cover to cover once a month.

Use your time well and commit yourself to the subject. Only by seriously making an attempt to become a skilled geographer will you get the most out of what could be a very enjoyable course.