Dear Geography Fresher,

Welcome to the Downing Geography family! We’re so excited to meet you in October. During Freshers’ Week we’ll have a picnic with all the new and old Downing geographers, to answer all your questions and get to know each other. In the meantime, this letter is to give you a better idea of exactly what you’ll be doing in terms of your degree during your first year, specifically your first term (Michaelmas). My name is Harriet - I’m a second year geographer who had an absolutely fantastic first year. You’ve got a lot to look forward to.

A standard week in first year will consist of 2-3 essays per fortnight, usually one a week in first term. They are set by your supervisors (who are based at various colleges), and you usually have to email them to them a few days before your weekly supervision. You then attend supervisions in groups of 2-3 to cover the topic more generally and then go over your essays in more depth. Lectures are generally one per day in first term, covering a mixture of human and physical geography topics. You’ll also have a practical in the computer lab once a week, which work towards the few pieces of coursework you’ll have to hand in over the year. Your lecture/lab timetable, lecture notes and reading lists will all be available on the geography intranet when you arrive.

What does this all mean for the workload? It means that you have very low contact hours compared to most other people studying other subjects, which can be both a blessing and a curse, depending what you make of it. It means that you really need to motivate yourself to work during the day, although it also gives you a lot of flexibility with your studying. There is always more reading to do, so you need to find a balance that works for you between studying, socialising and doing extra-curricular activities - all of which are very important to your time at Cambridge.

My best advice for first term is to start your essays as soon as you get them - there is a lot of reading to get through, and the more you read, the better your essays will be. Don’t worry about starting reading before you get here though - it’s very manageable. Also, stay on top of your lecture notes! This year most of us have found the most effective method to be to type up the base of the lecture notes before the lecture (the PowerPoint slides will appear on the intranet a few days before), then take your laptop to the lecture and add to your notes as the lecturer is speaking. It’s also fine to miss a lecture if you need to, people are generally very happy to send you their notes. Another thing to bear in mind is that you don’t have to understand everything. I’m a human geographer and we had an ‘Atmosphere and Climate’ lecture series in first term which totally freaked me out. But besides one essay I had to write that term, I never looked at it again. This is because when you eventually get to your exams (in Easter term, around the end of May), you only need to answer essays from 2 of the 7 physical geography topics you study. This doesn’t mean you can only attend 2 sets of lectures, but it does mean don’t worry too much if there is something you really don’t understand or like.

A lot of your human geography essays in first term will be more focused on learning how to write a good essay. It may feel a little tedious, but you’ll be learning really essential skills like Harvard referencing and how to write an excellent academic essay. Your physical essays are likely to be more about the content. Most importantly, your lovely second year geographers will be here whenever you need us! Any questions, queries or notes needed - just ask. There is a lot of geography socialising, both with students and staff, so there is a fantastic support network - use it!

Enjoy the rest of your summer, and we look forward to meeting you soon!

Geography love,

Harriet