

# Setting Up Your Workspace and Routines in Your New Home

## **A home away from home**

If you are just starting secondary school, now is the perfect time to reassess the space at home where you study and the routines you have established to see if these can be improved. If you have just moved to a new country, working through this chapter will help you think through what you need to do to make the most of your new study space. It will also clarify how much work you should be doing at home in secondary school, what type of study you should be doing and how to work effectively by minimising distractions.

It's more than likely that when you became an expat student you had to leave a lot of your belongings at home. (And possibly even your beloved pets!) The upside of this, though, is that you might get a whole lot of new things! Your new room may be bigger or smaller than your old one, or just very different from what you're used to. But it's really important that you keep a positive outlook and make the best of the space you've been given, no matter what. Some things that might be different:

- You may have to share a room with a sibling. Not always ideal!
- It may not be possible to paint the room, change furniture or put up pictures because it's a rental property.
- You may not have any control over the size or layout of the room.
- There may not be much choice in furnishings that are available in your new country. Even simple things like desks and chairs might be totally different from the ones at home.
- You may not be staying in the country for very long, so your parents may not want to spend much money making changes to your room.
- You may not have been able to bring many things from home with you, or you may not have even thought to do this. (Keep a list of what you want to bring back after your next visit home!)
- You may be used to a house but are now living in an apartment – or vice versa!



Describe what your working space is like in your new home. What is good or bad about it? Are there any constraints you have to deal with?

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**6 My new house in London was really small. I had to share a room with my younger sister, which I hated. I used to go to the school library sometimes after school ... but I got home too late, so I asked my parents if I could have the room to myself for an hour each night. My little sister hated being shut out – but too bad, I had too much work to do and she wouldn't be quiet. 9**

*Trudi, 16*

## Key areas to consider for your workspace

- **Workspace:** It's great if you can have a nice large workspace where you can spread your work out – and it doesn't have to be in your bedroom, as long as it's not somewhere full of distractions. If you don't have space for a large desk, consider getting a fold-up desk that slides under your bed or is propped against the wall. If you can't find a folding desk, check with your school, because they usually have small folding desks for exams and hopefully they can tell you where to buy one. Shops like IKEA have clever and inexpensive solutions for small spaces, too.
- **Chair:** OK, so this is one where you should ask your parents/guardians to get involved. It's really, *really* worth investing in a decent chair: one that supports your back properly, is adjustable and will ensure you aren't getting head, neck or back aches from the way you sit. In other words, not having the right chair can be a huge pain in the neck. The easiest way to find one of these chairs is to go to an office supplies business with your parents/guardians. And if you have the money and time to cover the seats with a cheerful pattern, that will help brighten up your room.
- **Desk lamp:** Unless you have sunlight coming through your window at all times, you should always have two lights on, both the room light and a desk lamp. Check that the bulb in your room light is strong enough – that's easily fixed. And get a strong desk lamp; always shine it toward your work, not toward your eyes. By the way, if you buy a decent chair and good lighting but you're still getting headaches, it's time to have your eyesight checked. You might also want to buy a lamp that has different settings or can be dimmed, so that

you can adjust the lighting to something more calming as you prepare to sleep.

- **Storage:** Hopefully there's some shelving or bookcases where you can fit all your school things – if not, maybe your parents can buy some for you. Otherwise, think about using plastic tubs or getting under-the-bed storage that you can easily slide out – don't hurt your back! You could also consider a small, portable filing cabinet that fits under your desk. You need space for:
  - Past tests, topics and assignments that you might need to study for your end-of-year exams. Keep your past work in a separate place to your current work.
  - Assignments that you're working on over a period of weeks.
  - The books and textbooks that you take back and forth to school each day.
- **Noticeboard:** See if you can put up a whiteboard or corkboard or both so you have somewhere to write to-do lists and pin important papers; you might not be able to fix it to the wall, but that's OK, as long as it's propped up where you can see it. Or, if you are allowed to make changes to your room, maybe get some blackboard or whiteboard paint: you can paint a section of a wall and then write on it with chalk or whiteboard markers. But if you want to put up photos of loved ones or make a gratitude board (see Chapter 3), do this separately. You really want to keep your school and personal spaces separate, but your school space can still be fun and colourful.





A few additional things to think about:

- **Roommates:** If you have to share a room, each roommate should have their own separate area to work and store their school materials. If you're sharing with a younger sibling, then you need to ask your parents/guardians for an hour or so each night when you can have the room to yourself and get your schoolwork done in peace.
- **Food:** Ever found yourself getting up and down a million times while you're trying to do your work? Don't worry, this is normal! But you may find taking some snacks with you instead will help. It's OK to eat while you're working, provided it isn't messy and you're eating something healthy rather than sugary or fatty: these unhealthy foods can make it more difficult for you to concentrate. And overeating will make you feel sleepy and make your thinking sluggish.
- **Music:** You've probably heard lots of things about music and learning. Let me make it simple for you: if you're doing work that doesn't require much effort or concentration, you can listen to any music you like. Go for it. But if you're doing difficult work that requires you to think or understand or remember, then either switch the music off or have baroque classical music on. That's because music of around 60 beats per minute with no lyrics helps the brain absorb information better. Maybe the words 'classical music' make you shudder with horror – if so, you can probably find a suitable alternative on YouTube if you search for 'study/concentration music'. When you study for a test while another type of music is on, you may not think it's having an effect on you but it's actually going to take you much longer to learn and remember the information. (You can always plan five-minute study breaks,

put in your earbuds and dance around to your favourite songs. It's good exercise, too, though you might not want to do it in front of your roommates.)

- **TV:** As a general rule, it's good if you don't do any work in front of the TV. Definitely don't do anything in front of the TV that requires you to think, process or remember, because it has the same effect on your memory and concentration as listening to the wrong music. Plus, you might miss the best dialogue on your favourite TV show because you're studying; and if an even more interesting show comes on, it will distract you, and you'll end up working much later. And when I say TV, I mean watching any shows or movies, on any devices!
- **Social media:** Yep, you guessed it, same rules as with music and TV. Always keep schoolwork time free from personal activities. If you can't stick to this completely, then make sure you keep social media turned off when you're trying to do work that requires effort and concentration. As for 'multi-tasking', that's a myth: you are never doing two tasks at the same time, you're just switching between these tasks. This is why it takes so much longer to complete your work if you're doing it while trying to engage with social media.



Plus, you'll want to stay in touch with your old friends. And then, of course, you have to fit in schoolwork.... What's the best way to do all of this?

Rather than coming back to your room and waiting until you 'feel' like doing schoolwork, or dragging your work out over the whole night, it's a great idea to set up an after-school routine. Plus, doing this helps stop your parents/guardians from nagging you, which is always a good thing!

The first step is to decide how much time you'll allocate to schoolwork. You need to see what your school requires (it may be in the school diary or on the school website), but here are some general guidelines. Remember, your school (and your parents/guardians) may expect you to do more, but this is a starting point.

Years 7–9	1–1.5 hours per day
Year 10	1–2 hours per day, depending on your school system
Year 11	2 hours per day to start
Years 12/13	2–3 hours per day

Does this include weekends? Yes, sorry, it does. That means for Years 7–10 around 7–10 hours per week, Year 11 around 14 hours per week and Years 12/13 around 14–21 hours per week. You can choose to allocate this time over the week as you please and even have days off.



What does your school diary or school website say about the workload expectations?

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What do your parents/guardians expect you to do?

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What do you think is fair?

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And what sort of work do you think you are meant to do during this time?

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Many students say things like ‘But I don’t have any homework’ or ‘I’ve finished everything’. This shows that they don’t really understand what they’re meant to be doing for school. Sadly, many students take a long time before they understand exactly what they’re meant to be doing in secondary school, and this has a huge impact on their academic achievements. So, let’s make it clear:

- 1. Homework:** Always make homework your first priority. Rather than allocating a certain amount of time for each subject, just focus to start with on working through the list of homework for the day.
- 2. Assessments:** Once the homework is done, focus on any assignments or tests that are coming up. Keep a list on your noticeboard or a calendar so you can clearly see what tasks are approaching (see Chapter 8 for a term planner).
- 3. Independent learning or ‘study’:** Any time left (out of the time you allocate for schoolwork) should be spent on independent learning: making study notes, working on difficult areas, doing reading, etc. – anything that will help you improve in your subjects.

So:

**Homework** = Things you *have* to do, usually things your teacher has told you to do.

**Assessments** = Things you *have* to prepare for in advance.

**Independent learning or ‘study’** = Things you *choose* to do that will help you understand your work better, get better marks and be better organised.

In some ways independent learning is even more important in an international school. You may find a level of maturity in your classmates that has come from travel, changing schools, having to adapt and broader experience. As a result, an independent approach to learning is more in evidence. Just doing the homework is not enough if you want to achieve your best. Plus you want to make sure that when you do return to your home country you haven't fallen behind. Here are some examples of independent learning:

- reading
- reviewing what you have been learning at school that week
- extra practice on questions you find hard
- catching up on work you have missed
- research on an area you are interested in learning more about
- making a mind map about what you have been learning
- making study notes on a topic
- improving your touch-typing skills
- reading ahead in your textbook
- improving your study skills
- doing work from a different textbook or study guide for one of your subjects (check the school library, local library and bookshops)
- learning more about the culture, people and history of the country you are now living in, through Google searches (OK, that won't necessarily help you get better marks, but it is something worth doing)



What is one interesting thing you've learnt about the country where you're living?

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How do you spread the work out over the evening and work efficiently at home?

You have three main options to choose from:

- 1. Create a weekly timetable.** Fill in all of the activities you do each week, then allocate the time for schoolwork over the week (see Chapter 8 for a weekly planner). Make the timetable realistic – if you know you'll never do work on a Friday night or as soon as you get home, or you usually Skype with a friend or your grandparents on a particular night, then don't schedule work for those times.
- 2. Work in half-hour blocks and complete the appropriate number of blocks each night.** During these half-hour blocks just focus on schoolwork, with no distractions or personal activities. You'll be amazed how much work you get done when you really focus.
- 3. Each afternoon, decide how you'll allocate your time.** Prioritise your work and then write down a timetable for the afternoon so you know exactly when you'll be doing what work.



Which option do you prefer and why?

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Other ways to be more efficient include:

- Before you start work, unpack your bag and deal with all of the loose pieces of paper – for example, get permission notes signed or file old assessment papers.
- Allocate a short block of time, around 15 minutes, to do small tasks that won't take long.
- Prioritise your work for the evening before you start so you don't leave the important and urgent things to the end.
- Take everything out that you'll need for the piece of work you're doing – then, when you finish, pack all of it away before starting the next piece of work.
- Record your favourite TV shows (if you don't have something like Netflix where you can watch shows whenever you want) and watch them in the times that aren't allocated to school-work.
- Try to get as much of your work done as possible before dinner.

- Set targets and rewards for yourself so you have goals to work toward and something to look forward to when you finish.
- Keep a list of things you need to ask your teachers about so you don't forget the next day.
- Do regular back-ups of your computer, and if you do a lot of work then do a back-up straight away.
- Ensure you have time scheduled to do the things you enjoy and stay in touch with your friends so you aren't tempted to do this when you need to knuckle down.
- When you're finished, put everything away and pack your bag for the next day.

You might already be doing some of these, or you might have other ideas on what works for you.



From the list above, what are the top two ideas you could implement to help yourself become more efficient?

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