

## Reflecting on My First Year at ZJE

### 803

“Honestly, I felt nervous during my first week here as the lectures were very challenging. I questioned myself too much. Can I catch up with everyone’s learning speed? Am I good enough to study here?”  
*(A diary excerpt written on 24 September 2018)*

If I could describe my first-year university journey in one word, it would be eye-opening. I have come to realize that I am more hardworking than I thought I was. Here is why.

#### First Semester

In the first semester, my main goal was to achieve a minimum passing grade (60 /100) in Mathematics and Chemistry as they were exceptionally challenging for me. To increase my Chemistry knowledge, I formed a study group called Chemistry Learning Buddies which consisted of 4 students. We planned on having a 30-minute meeting for 5 days a week. However, we met less often from time to time, and at one point, the meeting stopped. I will continue the Learning Buddies next academic year. To avoid rushing, I will increase the meeting duration to 1.5 hours and cut the meeting frequency to 3 times per week. For each lecture that my group will review, every member will be required to send a message in our WeChat group one day before a meeting is scheduled. The message must contain a list of the materials that they find difficult and the parts that they can teach others.

Last semester, I used the library resources to support my studies well. I borrowed some Calculus exercise books with step-by-step solutions to guide me through each question. I also apply this method in the IBMS course. Whenever I read the Campbell textbook, I do the ‘Concept Check’ questions, then read the detailed explanations. At the end of the semester, I achieved my goal by getting an average of 73 for Chemistry and 70 for Mathematics.

I participated in the tutorials actively. In senior high school, I did not like speaking in front of the class. In here, I learned that an excellent communication skill was not merely a natural-born talent, but a skill which could be improved. My tips for being communicative in tutorials were preparing some notes for the discussion beforehand, maintaining eye contacts and saying the first thing on my mind without worrying too much about my English ability. My tutorial experiences have greatly helped me handle impromptu questions in the ICMB Journal Club.

#### Second Semester

My main challenges in the second semester are managing time, completing individual work and reflecting on feedback. I often stay up until 4 AM on the deadline day. Next academic year, I will start doing my ICAs at least 3 weeks before the deadline and spend 1.5 or 2 hours each day on the assignments. I will also set a daily reminder in Outlook Calendar. Although I am struggling with time management, I have been more productive this semester than the last semester. In the first semester, I usually sat at the back of the class because I got up 45 minutes before a lecture started. This semester,

I always sit in the second or third row because I get up 2 hours before a lecture starts to preview the PowerPoint slides.

I feel more comfortable working in groups than individually. Based on my past ICMB and IBI group assignment experiences, my team members and I clearly defined the responsibilities of each person, set the time to meet regularly and gave frequent feedback to one another. In individual work, I often find staying on topic difficult. For example, according to the marker of my Comparing and Contrasting Neurons and Cardiac Muscle Cells essay, I wrote a very good description of the properties of both cells. However, I hardly used the compare and contrast language. If I had focused more on comparing and contrasting, my writing would be more accurate. In my Effects of Stress on Blood Pressure report, I also focused on explaining the statistics more than the actual observations. Next semester, I will first identify the aims of the ICAs or experiments, then write a plan revolving around the main points. The plan will contain items which I will include in the introduction, main body and conclusion.

My last significant challenge is reflecting on feedback. I usually receive long feedback for my ICAs which take some time to be reflected. To tackle this issue, I printed the feedback on A3 papers, color-coded the text and put them on my bedroom wall (Figure 1). Next semester, I will start keeping a learning journal to record what I learn from the feedback, what I do well and what I need to improve.

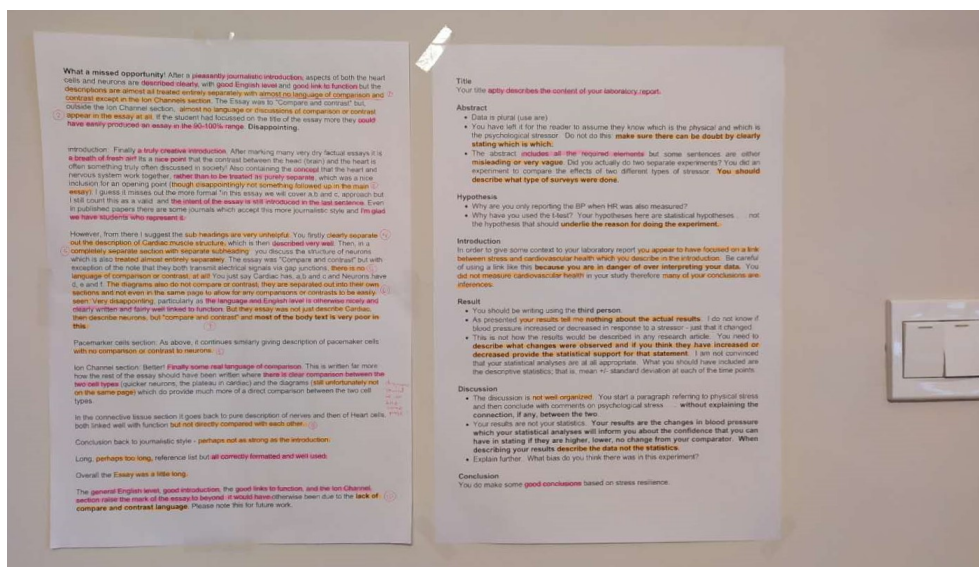


Figure 1. Color-coded ICAs feedback on my bedroom wall

In conclusion, the first semester was about surviving academically. In the second semester, I have been able to catch up with the learning speed in my university. Therefore, my challenges are mainly related to soft skills, such as time management, feedback reflection and working independently. Although my struggle was unpleasant, especially with Mathematics and Chemistry courses, I still think that it was worth the eye-opening lesson, that I indeed am more capable and tough than I believed.

(865 words)