

A Crash Course in Living Away From Home

This is my guide on how to succeed at living away from home, coming from someone who has attended boarding school and lived in a dorm since 14. As we get closer to the fall and the actual "holy hell, I'm actually gonna be in college soon," here's my advice on dorm essentials, roommates, bathrooms, life skills, and homesickness.

Dorm essentials:

- **A mattress pad.** I have never slept on a bed in an institution that was actually comfortable. Invest in a good one. It will save your back and also make coming home to sleep a lot nicer.
- **Shower shoes and a shower caddy.** Do I even need to explain this one?
- **Room decor.** It's a lot less depressing to be in a shoebox of a room if you have decor. There isn't a ton of space for things like throw pillows or beanbags, but having printed pictures and fairy lights can make your room a lot more cozy. A little rug is nice too.
- **Wireless headphones/earbuds.** Your roommate does not want to listen to your TV show or music as you putter about your room. Wireless headphones allow you to listen to whatever you want without disturbing your roommate. As a general rule of thumb, unless you are watching/listening to something socially or are alone, you should be using headphones.
- **Power strips with extended cords are a must.** I kid you not, I had a single outlet in my dorm room that I had to figure out how to run a fridge off of while also charging all my devices and running a diffuser, a fan, and a tea kettle.
- **Living essentials.** I'm talking about cleaning supplies, bedding, dishes, towels, first aid supplies, a water bottle, laundry stuff, etc. Your dorm room largely functions as a miniature house and as such, you will need the supplies to cook, clean, and generally take care of yourself.
- **Appliances** are tricky. I would look at dorm rules and what you can afford before investing. Also, coordinate with your roommate about who will buy what. As it stands, the essential dorm appliances are a fridge, microwave, and hot water pot. You can make all the essentials (tea and ramen) with those supplies. A Brita filter is nice if you can fit it in your fridge. If your dorm doesn't have AC, get a standing fan. It will keep you alive during the hot and humid months.
- **Hangers!** Do not forget the hangers.
- **Lock.** You'll want a locked drawer for ~reasons~, whether that be money, medication, important documents, whatever. There is some stuff you just can't risk getting stolen.

- **Storage bins** will save you. Store food, school books, etc in them. Make sure they fit in the places you want them to before buying!
- **Other stuff:** clothes, shoes, jackets, toiletries, school supplies, bags, sports equipment. Basically anything you use on a day to day basis.

Side note: less is more. I made the mistake of bringing way too much stuff. It's a pain in the ass to haul around during move-in and move-out and is generally just not worth it. People often overestimate the number of clothes and number of nostalgic items they need. I promise you, it's so much nicer to just have the essentials of living with a few comfort/nostalgic/fancy things. You don't need to bring your entire shoe or book collection.

Practical Skills & Important Things

- **Laundry.** Please know how to do laundry. Do not leave your items in a washer/dryer overnight or longer than the wash cycle. Someone might throw it on the ground, or worse, throw it out.
- **Dishes.** Moldy food is not only gross, but it will make your room smell like shit and your roommate want to defenestrate you. Nobody cleans up for you in a dorm.
- **General tidiness.** Most dorms are shoeboxes. What flies as "clean" in a larger room does not fly as "clean" in a dorm room because the space is so small. Have a place for everything and keep spaces like your desk surface clear. Hang up and fold your clothes. Take out the damn trash.
- **Basic cooking.** You don't need to be able to whip up a Michelin star meal, but learn how to make simple meals in case you can't get food from the college dining halls or order online. As a rule of thumb, it's always good to have a couple packets of instant ramen and instant oatmeal lying around.
- **Know who to call.** If something goes wrong, you're going to want to have the contact information of relevant people like your RA or security services. I recommend inputting those contacts once you have them into your phone.
- **Medical issues.** If you have a chronic illness, disability, or any type of condition mental or physical that needs to be managed by a doctor, you're going to need to get a practitioner set up near your college. Have your current doctor help find you one or use the college's resources (many keep a list of providers). Figure out your health insurance, the hospital you'll primarily seek care from, and pharmacies. Keep all the paperwork and documentation you'll need accessible. Get your school accommodations set up preemptively! Also, if relevant, wear a physical medical ID or set one up in your phone (iOS devices have one in the Health app)
- **Money management.** The basic principles of financial health such as having a bank account, keeping a relative budget, and not living outside your means are crucial. Personally, I would recommend getting a credit/debit card set up before you leave home.

Cash is not king, and it sometimes can be hard to find ATMs on campus. Having an emergency credit card attached to my parent's bank account is something that I have had all four years and is a contingency for me for medical or transportation emergencies. Have your own bank account and understand how to access it and not go into debt.

- **Critical items.** Having important documentation is really important. If you don't have a drivers license, you'll need a state ID or a passport. Memorize your SSN! It's likely you'll need it at some point. You should have your health insurance cards to use in case you need to seek emergency medical treatment. If you have chronic illnesses or disabilities, know where and how to access your diagnostic paperwork, along with things like vaccine records and medication lists. If you have a car, you'll need your car's registration and insurance. Once you have your student ID and key to your dorm, don't lose it. Keep all of this type of stuff either with you, digitally, or in a locked drawer in your dorm.
- **Time management.** Nobody will police you when you're away from home. You need to figure out how to make a schedule and stick to it. Routine can be very beneficial during times of stress.
- **Coping skills.** Living away from home can be stressful in itself. There are lots of supports built in to an undergrad college, but knowing how to take care of yourself and your emotions is key. I have a list [here](#).
- **Self-care.** A lot of people have the misconception that self-care is a fancy bubble bath or an expensive meal. Self-care is really about practicality and helping yourself succeed. Think of it as investing in your future self, whether that be legitimate self-improvement or just lessening the burdens your future self will have to carry. Whether that be going to the gym on a regular basis, setting boundaries with toxic friends, keeping a strict morning routine, or doing work when you don't want to because you know it will bite you in the ass, self-care is key to keeping yourself not only functional, but happy. Of course there's always room to treat yourself, but that should not be the focus. It's hard to build up self-discipline which is key to self-care, but it's really worth it.
- **Seeking help.** Living away from home is hard. Feeling like an adult for the first time is hard. Use the resources you are provided with to your best advantage. Student health services, counseling, disability accommodations, writing centers, career centers, etc. All these resources at your disposal can help you succeed. There's no shame in asking for help. College is a time of transition between the teen years and the "real" adult years. The rug won't be pulled out from under you completely. There are still a lot of safeguards and people who can help.
- **Responsibility.** For some people, the first time they are away from home is the first time they face accountability. There is no parent to step in or soften the blow. Your actions, either positive or negative, have consequences. It's okay to have fun, but don't compromise your integrity or future.

Bathrooms:

I can't believe I am dedicating a whole section to this, but I know communal bathrooms are a large source of fear for y'all. Side note, I only have the experience of living in a single-gender dorm, so I don't know how coed bathrooms would work.

- I promise you, you are thinking a LOT more about yourself than others are thinking about you. Everyone minds their business in the bathroom.
- If you are uncomfortable changing in a bathroom (even behind a curtain), change in your room instead. Wear a robe to the bathroom along with shower shoes. Bring a shower caddy with all your toiletries and a towel. Then walk to the bathroom, pop in the shower, put on your robe again, and go back into your room to change into real clothes.
- Please clean up after yourself. Don't spit on the mirror, leave puddles on the floors, or otherwise make the bathroom gross. It's disgusting and disrespectful.

Roommates:

- For many people, this will be the first time living with someone and sharing the same space. Dorm rooms are small, and you will become intimately acquainted with your roommate in many ways. Having a roommate can be an absolutely wonderful experience and how you make a best friend or it can be very challenging.
- **Setting boundaries.** The biggest source of bad roommate experiences is bad boundaries or total lack of them. When you first get a roommate and establish a rapport, make it clear what is acceptable to you and what isn't. Then come up with a list that you both agree with or can make compromises on. Most colleges pair roommates up by living style questionnaires, but it can't help to make clarifications. Some examples of questions to ask:
 - How can you be best contacted in an emergency?
 - What time do you go to bed on weeknights? Weekends?
 - Are people okay to sleep over in your room?
 - Are you okay with sharing food? If so, what?
 - Are guests allowed at any time or only with advance notice?
 - Can you share things like cleaning supplies, clothes, etc? If so, what items?
 - What alarm times/how many alarms in the morning is okay?
 - What time do you get up in the morning on weekdays? Weekends?

- What time do you want to turn the lights off and on during the day?
- Are you clean or messy?
- What level of noise (phone calls, TV, etc) is acceptable?
- If you are in an unbearable or even highly uncomfortable living situation, it is okay to try and change roommates. For a lot of people, their dorm is their “safe space” and so it’s worth it to make an effort to get your experience to be as good as possible. Talk to your RA to resolve imminent conflicts and don’t be afraid to go to student life if something big needs to be changed.

Homesickness:

- This is not something I personally experienced to a large degree, mainly because of how I was raised. However, I know a lot of people who struggled with homesickness.
- As much as it is uncomfortable, the college experience is unique and valuable. When you go home, it may feel like you’ve outgrown your childhood home or life. Although wanting to go home may feel safer, you’ll grow a lot if you stick it out.
- Maintaining relationships with your family and close friends from home is essential. Keeping up with long-distance friendships can be difficult, so I recommend regularly making time to FaceTime or text, or even meet up if your paths somehow intersect. Your parents will probably want to hear from you, so make sure you call them every so often, provided you want to and have a good relationship. They’ve likely been one of the biggest sources of comfort and support for you for your whole life, and now that you’ve moved out, that won’t go away. You’re not going to lose your home life entirely.
- Build connections at school. Although it’s scary, the first few months of college are when people really start to build friendships and friendship groups. Joining clubs, participating in orientation stuff, getting involved with sport teams, talking to people in classes, and generally making an effort to be social will help you build your own community.
- If your homesickness is becoming overwhelming, or severely detrimental to your mental health, seek support through the student mental health office or the equivalent. It will eventually pass, or at least become more bearable, and seeking support can help make the burden easier.

I think that is about everything! If you have any questions, please feel free to ask. Moving away from home was simultaneously the scariest thing I’ve ever done but also the best. I learned so much about independence, responsibility, self-reliance, and self-advocacy. Really, I just learned how to make my way through life.

Per popular request, [a full list](#) of pretty much anything you could ever need to bring to college in no particular order. [[Now in CHECK-OFF-ABLE SPREADSHEET FORM!](#)]

See the original Reddit post [here](#). I have highlighted some important additions/advice from the comments below:

Re: Personal Finance Advice for College Kids

u/ScholarGrade

I highly recommend getting a credit card in college. It will help you establish credit history in your own name so when you try to get an auto loan, home loan, etc, you will actually have a chance of getting approved. Just make sure you pay it off every month because ain't nobody got 29.99% APR to throw around.

ALSO - having credit can help you get a job because most employers (for good jobs anyway) will pull a credit report. It can help you get lower insurance rates for whatever kind of insurance you buy (auto, homeowners, renters, motorcycle, life, etc). A good credit score is a huge asset and will save you a ton of money over the course of your life. So get a credit card and start working on it.

u/3VERYTHING0ES

Second this so much.

My mom worked as a Certified Financial Planner for a while and this was her first piece of financial advice for me. Get a credit card that has no annual fee and use it very sparingly to build credit as soon as you turn 18. Never buy more than you can pay off. Debt will trash your credit score and you will also have to pay interest on whatever you have outstanding.

Additionally, if you plan on working through college, setting up a Roth IRA to contribute to will be an amazing gift to yourself later in life, as the earlier you start contributing the more capital you can build.

Re: What is a Roth IRA?

u/ScholarGrade

IRA is an individual retirement account. It means you put money into it and the government doesn't tax you on that money until you withdraw it in retirement. So you can lower your taxes now and save money for when you're retired. A Roth IRA is a special type of IRA where you put in money after having already paid income taxes on it. The government agrees to allow you to use that money (and any gains on investments) tax free in retirement. So I paid income taxes on the \$3k, but the \$12k of gains is tax free. It's a pretty sweet deal.

Re: Credit Cards and Debit Cards, Should I have both?

u/3VERYTHING0ES

Yes!

Use a debit card or cash for most of your purchases. Your bank can configure your debit card so that you cannot overdraw (go into debt). If you try and spend more money than what's in your checking account, it will automatically decline. That will keep you from overspending by force until it becomes a habit.

Like ScholarGrade said, having a credit card open that you use minimally will help establish a

good credit score which is very important later in life. The thing about credit cards is that you should never ever charge to it more than what you actually have the capability to pay upfront. The only exception to this in my mind is an emergency. Debt is something you want to avoid at all costs, and having a credit card open that you use minimally is perfect.

Re: How much should I use my credit card? I'm afraid of debt.

u/3VERYTHING0ES

As long as your credit card is open, you're establishing credit. You should ideally spend a little bit on it each month and pay it off in full each time. There is no minimum amount you have to spend to build credit. As for how much to spend, that's proportional to how much you have in the bank. Basically, you can charge whatever to your credit card as long as you are definitively sure you can pay the entire cost off by the end of the month.

Re: Packing and International Student Advice

u/astro-temp

I'd advise you to limit how much you buy before moving! Only pack essentials that you would use regularly (i.e. over any average 2 week period). You can buy anything extra as you need it, otherwise if you try to predict everything you'll need/want, you'll pack way too much and end up never touching a large amount. You can get extra stuff sent over or pick it up in the holidays too. That especially applies to dorm decorations and clothes. What you think you want now and what you will actually want as a university student are two different things. Also, it won't be more expensive to buy in the new location but it *will* be expensive to pay for extra luggage or to have to drive instead of fly because you have too much shit with you.

Edit: additional tips for intl's you might want to add u/3VERYTHING0ES

- Keep all important documents (e.g. birth certificates, passports, financial documents) *together*. That doesn't just mean you can keep them in the same drawer, they need to be in a single folder or something. I keep mine all together in a very large, plastic "sandwich bag". That way when I need to travel, I can just grab that and be sure everything I could possibly need at immigration is in there. Want to see 3 months' of bank statements? All right here.
- Open an international bank account. I'm talking TransferWise or Revolut sorta thing — do your own research on these and find one that works for you! These systems allow you to set up multiple accounts in different currencies and have very low fees for converting currencies, meaning you save a shitload of money in international bank transfers since everything you do counts as "local".
- Get some proper travel gear. My best purchase ever was a jacket with zipped internal pockets because that's where my key documents go when I fly and that jacket does not come off or leave my sight. Bags can be lost and theft can happen, especially if you're using public transport to get to/from an airport. Your passport and (to a lesser extent) other personal documents are your life and you must treat them as though they are priceless. Don't carry your passport around unless you have to (**don't** use it as normal ID), and when you do, be absolutely neurotic over it.

Re: Dorm Shoes

u/toxic-miasma

Minor addendum - flip flops/slides/other house slippers. Wearing your outside shoes around on your dorm floors will make things dirty and dusty in no time, and if it's carpet it's probably kinda sus and if it's hard floors it's probably cold tile. You don't wanna go barefoot, trust me.

Re: Sharing Schedules with Roommates

u/3VERYTHING0ES

If that is something you and your roommate wanted to do, I think it's a great idea! After a month or so of living together, you'll start to figure out each other's routines intuitively.

When it comes to bothering, it's basically a cardinal sin of being roommates to interrupt them while they are deep in a study session, on the phone with parents, or dead asleep unless it's an emergency. For most people, everything else is negligible and about reading social cues (headphones vs not headphones, facing the wall, etc).

As for special occasions, like them leaving for a weekend, make it a habit to give each other some notice. If you're going to be gone for several days, a week's notice is great so they can make plans to invite people over if they want.

If you set good ground rules from the beginning that you are comfortable with, you can always modify on a case by case basis.

For example, normally my roommate and I turn off the lights at 11pm. If one of us wants to make a change, we ask each other if that's okay, which has led to some great deep cleaning at 2am sessions.

It's all about being respectful of each other and the space you share.

Re: Healthy Groceries in College?

u/cacaovinegar

[\[See comment thread here\]](#)

Re: Lost Phones

u/fishyswims192

Another thing I may suggest - it sounds dumb, but use a label maker and label your phone's case interior with a friend/roommate/parent's phone number. I go to Purdue, where everyone lost their shit after it snowed this past weekend so we all went sledding amongst other stuff

and good god, the number of people posting on behalf of their roommate searching for a lost phone is countless. Finding the phone is one thing, but once the phone is found, it will be reunited with the owner pretty quickly. Also pretty sure there's a feature where once you set your phone on lost mode, the designated contact number will appear on the screen.

Re: A parent's college advice

u/mitzvahmaven

This post is wonderfully comprehensive and spot on.

My advice to my (now college-grad) children was threefold:

#1 - Show up. Show up to class. Show up to office hours. Show up to dorm activities. Show up to socials/meetings/events. I am hopeful that the incoming class of first years this fall will actually have orientation and in-person classes.

#2 - You always have options. Never feel so overwhelmed or stressed that you feel hopeless and self-isolate. RAs, academic counselors, religious counselors, and family/friends can help you define your options.

#3 - (which relates to #2) - Know your resources. College campuses are chock-full of resources that exist to help you - academically, psychologically, emotionally, physically, spiritually. Reach out way before a crisis. Establish good relationships and communication with advisors, teaching assistants, professors, residential advisors, chaplains, etc.

Best of luck to all on their college journeys! You are all amazing!

Re: The Important of Clean Rooms

u/khanacademy03

Can I add that you should keep your room neat? Part of a college education is learning how to live a civilized life without someone telling you what to do. Organization and cleanliness will be basics for the rest of your life, so college is a great place to start practicing if you haven't already.

Source: another HS senior who has been boarding since 14.

u/3VERYTHING0ES

Yes. I 100% endorse this. I learned so much about tidiness and effective organization while living in a dorm. The adage "clean space, clean mind" is very true. Making your bed every day, keeping stuff off the floor, etc. Simple things like that are very nice to do and build good habits.

Re: Bikes on Campus?

u/3VERYTHING0ES

I don't know how you would go about the logistics of getting a bike to campus, but I can advise you a little on whether or not you should bring one.

You're going to want to think about your transportation options and relative location. Is your college in a city with good public transit? Can you easily call an Uber? Is there a well-run campus shuttle? If you have any of these opportunities, it may be easier just to utilize them.

If your campus is more spread out or you want the flexibility to get around on your own, a bike could be a good idea. Just consider the level of traffic, distance, time, difficulty of terrain, etc. Also an important factor is weather. If it's super snowy and icy, riding a bike during the winter months isn't exactly advisable. Look into the climate of your college and use Google Maps to figure out distances, elevation gains, etc.

If you are going to college in the relative middle of nowhere and have to drive like 20 minutes to get groceries, you're gonna want a car instead of a bike.