



Degree Planning Guide *for College Students*



Chase the Write Dream

Degree Planning Guide for College Students

Why hello there! I created this guide as a reference tool for any college students who want a more efficient way of deciding on which classes to take and when. The ultimate goal is to make sure you satisfy all of your school's graduation requirements within the desired timeframe (typically 4 years for a bachelor's degree).

I've found that actually writing things down will GREATLY help you stay organized and on track, so I've included a few worksheets to go along with this guide. You can find them on the last few pages!

Make sure you check out my blog, [Chase the Write Dream](#), for a wealth of information related to college, as well as topics that will affect you into your twentysomething years.

To guide you through these steps, I've provided a couple of problems and solutions that often occur when college students create their schedules and degree plans.

Problem #1: Students Rely on Their Advisor to Tell Them Which Classes to Take

Do not, I repeat, **DO NOT** rely on your academic advisor to be your go-to person for deciding which classes to take. Yes, you may be lucky and have one that is super helpful, but I'm guessing that the majority of you are probably going to end up with an advisor that expects you to do most of the ground work.

I've seen this problem play out in several cases, and let me tell you... the end result is never pretty. Usually the student ends up taking extra classes their last term, graduating late, or begging to get taken off of a waitlist. It's ugly and not something that you want to deal with.

Solution: Study the Catalog and Degree Plan Before Class Registration Begins

Your school should have a course catalog available online so that you can look up all the necessary information you'll need:

- General education requirements
- Courses required for your major
- Hours needed in-residence
- Total hours needed for degree completion

Honestly, this catalog is a gold mine and often overlooked by students because they don't think they need to know all the ins and outs of their program. Do yourself a favor and spend some time understanding these requirements so that you know what is expected of you as a student. You may notice other important bits of information, such as minimum GPA requirements, attendance details, and so on.

Homework: Make a list of all the required general education classes and major classes that you need to take to graduate ([Look for the printable in the back called The Path to Graduation](#)).

Tip: If you are required to take 2 courses in the same general education category, list those on separate lines. You'll use the yellow circles to check things off later and you wouldn't want to check off something that was only halfway completed (which would happen if you only took a 3 hour psychology course and you checked off the box for social sciences, only to find out that you needed 6 hours in that category... YIKES)!

Now you know the basic details of what it's going to take to graduate with your degree. Great! Let's look at another problem that often comes up...

Problem #2: Students Fail to Outline Their Classes in Advance

It's wonderful to have a list of all the required courses you need to take, but what good is that going to be if you have no plan for when to take those classes? Seriously though, it's going to do absolutely nothing for you if you don't do some careful planning.

I've seen a lot of students fall into this trap. They get all googly-eyed over the awesome electives being offered that semester and they forget that they have a ton of other requirements to satisfy before graduation. So instead of taking Intro. to Psychology (which is a prerequisite for higher level courses in that major), they decide to take Pottery 101. Well, by the time next semester rolls around, they try to sign up for both the Intro. class and a higher level class, only to find out that they can't take the second one because they haven't satisfied the prerequisite. Yikes!

Solution: Write Out Your Class Schedule for the Entire Four Years

This may sound like a little much to some of you, but I promise that this will relieve A LOT of stress later. By writing out your class schedule, you'll be able to see exactly how many open slots you have for electives (and/or a minor), as well as what order the classes should be taken in.

Homework: Go to the [Degree Plan worksheet](#) and work on completing your class schedule as you read through this section.

Since the process can be a little confusing, I'm going to walk you through how I put together my four-year schedule. Keep in mind that you may have to do some tweaking along the way due to a class being waitlisted, canceled, or unavailable, but if you set this up properly, you should have no issue making those simple changes when they come about.

Step 1: Fill in Your Major Course Requirements First

The key here is to start with your prerequisites first. I highly recommend that you take at least one or two of these courses during your freshman year so that you can jump into the higher level classes sooner rather than later. Every school's course numbering system is a little different, but typically the first number gives you a hint as to what year-level the course is aimed toward. Here's an example:

- PSY 101
- PSY 203
- PSY 302
- PSY 490

You'll notice that the first number ranges from 1 to 4. The 1 can be equated to a freshman level course, 2 to sophomore, 3 to junior, and 4 to senior. This is kind of a cheat sheet to use to help you organize your classes better.

Now, let's look at your list of courses. Go through and put a star next to any that are a prerequisite for another course ([you can do this on The Path to Graduation worksheet](#)). Typically, any course that begins with "Intro" or something of that nature is going to need to be completed before you can move on in the program.

At this point, you should have at least a few classes with some stars next to them. These are the classes that you are going to want to take during your first year.

Note for Community College Students:

The majority of your courses at the community college level are going to be used to satisfy general education requirements. For those few courses that might be offered in your major, enroll in any that are transferrable to a

university. This way, you will complete your general education classes and have some prerequisites out of the way before you transfer to a four-year school.

Back to Building Your Degree Plan...

Ok, so now you have your prerequisite courses marked with a star on the Path to Graduation worksheet. It's now time to write those into your Degree Plan worksheet. As I mentioned before, you'll want to take at least one or two of these during your freshman year. Ideally, you will take at least the Intro course during your first semester so that you know whether this is a truly a topic you are interested in or not!

You can also complete your degree plan backwards, meaning that you start with the very last course in the major (usually a seminar, project, or capstone course) and then work backwards. Any course that has a ton of prerequisites will most likely need to be completed toward the end of your four years.

Keep in mind that there will be some major courses that have no prerequisites. I like to call these classes 'floaters' because they can essentially be placed anywhere in your degree plan.

(We'll discuss how to use these to your advantage in a minute, but let's make sure that you have your other classes in place first)

[If you haven't already, take a few minutes to fill in your Degree Plan worksheet, making sure to put the prerequisites early on in your college career and those with many prerequisites toward the end \(think last semester of junior year and after\).](#)

At this point, you should all classes that are either a prerequisite or that require a prerequisite put into your sheet. We're going to leave this where it is for a second and do some research so that we can complete the next part.

Step 2: Find Which Major Courses Satisfy General Education Requirements

At least one or two of your major courses should satisfy a general education course requirement. At my school, I was able to get a social science credit for my Intro class, and I also satisfied my 6 credit hours of writing intensive classes. You can find out which of your major classes satisfy which general education requirements by doing a simple Google search (I've included an example below so that you can follow along and see how this works. Once you get the hang of it, try doing it for your school).

Example: I go to Google and type in NC State Gen Ed. I click on the first link available (which says GEP Requirements) and I'm taken to a page that lists all of the requirements at NC State for general education. Before the category requirements, I see a link that says "Click here for GEP Category course lists. ← That's the moneymaker link because it's going to allow me to see which courses will satisfy each general education requirement.

When you find out that a course in your major satisfies a general education requirement, make sure you document that on your Path to Graduation worksheet. If you haven't already, go ahead and put any of those courses into your Degree Plan worksheet. Once you list that class in your Degree Plan worksheet, make sure you check the yellow box for both the general education class requirement and the major class requirement. This will help you to see which classes you've already entered and which ones still need to be put into your schedule.

Step 3: Fill in the Remaining Required Courses

You should have all of your required courses listed on The Path to Graduation worksheet now and you should have a few courses put into your Degree Plan worksheet. Make sure you have both in front of you as you go through this step!

This is where the fun begins... if you like puzzles, that is.

With the prerequisites and final courses written in your degree plan, it's time to bring back those outliers, as well as your required general education courses. The great thing about most of these courses is that even though you are putting them into your degree plan, you should be able to switch them around later should a schedule conflict come up (i.e. the class time doesn't work for you, the class is already full, etc.).

Keep in mind that most bachelor degree programs require you to complete around 120 credit hours (give or take), which means you need to take 15 credit hours each semester to graduate in four years. Every school does their hours a bit differently, so make sure you keep track of which courses count for more or less than 3 hours (since that's the standard number of hours a typical class is).

I recommend starting to fill in your degree plan with the major courses first since those are extremely important. I HIGHLY recommend completing the majority of these courses, give a take one or two, during your first three years of college. This not only allows you to have a less intense senior year, but it also gives you a buffer in case you need to retake a class or fit one in that couldn't fit into your schedule any other semester.

[Each time you add a course to your Degree Plan worksheet, make sure you check it off on your Path to Graduation worksheet.](#)

I know this is all sounding so exciting (not), but you are almost done!

Now, it's time to add in those pesky general education courses. Take some time to look through the various courses that satisfy these requirements. Yes, there are bound to be a few that are just flat out boring, but there should be at least some that spark some sort of interest in you.

Still not sure which courses you want to take? No worries! Go ahead and just write in something like 'Gen. Ed. Science with Lab' in the degree plan so that a spot is reserved for that requirement. Then, when you're deciding on classes during registration each semester, you'll be reminded that you need to take a course that satisfies that requirement. Make sure you reserve a slot for every general education requirement that you have to meet!

Once you have every required class (major and general education) put into your degree plan, you'll notice something...There should be checkmarks next to every listed course on your Path to Graduation worksheet. Yay!!!!

At this point, you've got a plan for how you are going to get all of those required courses completed during your four years, and you probably still have a few elective slots to fill!

Step 4: Fill in Your Electives

You don't have to worry about these now if you don't want to, but feel free to write in something like 'Elective' so that you at least know that some sort of course needs to be taken that semester. Oh, and remember what I said about credit hours and such earlier? I recommend adding up how many hours you will be getting from your required courses each semester and then using that number to figure out how many hours of electives you should be taking.

Say what?!

Trust me... you'll want to do this!

Let's say you have to take a science course with a lab to satisfy one of your general education requirements. Upon further notice, you see that it is worth 4 hours instead of the usual 3. The other three classes you've put into your degree plan all count for 3 hours, so you have 13 credit hours total for that semester. You have one elective slot and are trying to decide how many hours it needs to be. In this scenario, you could take a 2 or 3 hour elective and still reach the recommended 15 hours per semester so that you can graduate on time.

Make sense? Keep playing with it and don't be afraid to write down numbers for all of your classes (I did and I am so glad). It may sound a bit extreme, but there is literally nothing worse than petitioning to graduate and finding out that you're a few hours short because you didn't pay attention to little details like this.

Your degree plan is now done!!! Time to celebrate!!!

But seriously... go get yourself some chocolate or something, because you deserve it.

Problem #3: Students Fail to Update Their Degree Plan

Think of your degree plan as a living document, meaning that it can be updated at any time. You may find that changes need to be made when you:

- Change your major
- Add or change a minor
- Decide to double major
- Need a schedule rearrangement due to a class being full

Solution: Keep a Fresh Copy of Your Degree Plan in Sight and Make Any Necessary Changes

Whenever you find that your degree plan needs updated, you can either print off a new sheet or simply cross out those things that no longer apply. If you have a required course for your major that needs to be completed but the class was full, you should make sure to schedule it for the next available term.

Example: My original degree plan says I was supposed to take PSY 383 this semester, but all of the classes are full. I immediately look to my next semester and see that I have planned to take a general elective humanities course. I will now schedule to take the humanities course this term and PSY 383 next term.

Do you see how I swapped those classes? It helps me stay on track while making sure I get that required PSY class completed as soon as possible.

A Note for Seniors: I've worked with a few college seniors who have had a problem with enrollment during their last few terms due to required classes being full. This is never a fun situation to get in because not having those classes means you aren't graduating on time. My advice is to go to your program's main office and ask if you can have a waiver to be enrolled in that class. Most of the time, you will get to override the waitlist because these are classes you HAVE to take to graduate.

Important Tip for All Students: You should ALWAYS try to enroll in your courses on the day that registration opens. The longer you wait, the greater the opportunity to get shut out of the class. If you complete your registration the day it opens, you shouldn't have any issues with getting the classes you need to graduate.

How Did You Do?!

Were you able to get your degree plan all set up for college? Do you have any questions? You can always stop by [Chase the Write Dream](#) for more college tips and advice. Also, you can send an email to hello@chasethewritedream.com with any feedback you may have. I always love to hear from my readers and want to make sure that the content stays relevant to you!

-Tori

Degree Plan



First Year



Second Year



Third Year



Fourth Year

MONTHLY SCHEDULE

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday