

# A day in the life of a **Physics Student**

Thursday is our longest day in college, but it's also our most varied: a three-hour lab session, followed by three lectures. We kick off at 10am, with General Labs. Today, my lab partner and I are measuring the radioactive decay of the Barium-137 isotope in real-time – it takes about half an hour to decay fully, so we can measure it in the lab, which is pretty remarkable. Our data fits an exponential decay curve nicely, so we're very pleased.

1pm: We have an hour for lunch. We eat in different places on campus every day but today we head to the restaurant. There are ten or twelve of us, and we have a great time chatting about last night's TV, funny stuff people came across on the Internet, and the Physics night out in town that's planned for next week, among other things.

2pm: The first of our lectures is Quantum Physics. The course covers topics we're familiar with from the Leaving Cert., like the Photoelectric Effect, and goes all the way through to concepts like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and the Schrödinger Wave Equation. It's a very interesting and popular module.

3pm: Maths. This semester, we're studying Calculus of Several Variables, which is basically differentiation in three dimensions. While the concepts are new, the actual calculus is pretty much Leaving Cert. standard.

4pm: Last lecture of the day, Relativity and Nuclear Physics. We've been looking at Einstein's theory of Special Relativity;  $E=mc^2$ , time dilation, length contraction, relativistic momentum and energy, the twin paradox... there are a lot of strange and fascinating effects that occur at velocities close to the speed of light.

5pm: Lectures are finished, but a student's day is never complete without some hanging around, so we go to Zero One, the café underneath the library. One of the nice things about Physics is that it's a niche subject, so the people who study it tend to have a lot in common. Because of this, the class get along really well, and we can talk, literally, for hours on end. After one of our exams last January, we sat down in Zero One at 11:30am, and didn't leave till after 4:30pm!

Tonight, though, it's been a long day, and most people have gone by 6pm. We're off at 1pm tomorrow, so we'll have more time for hanging out, and hopefully a few games of pool as well.

**Catherine Doyle**

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