

navigating your first semester: campus life tips from aelo swiss academy seniors

Ask anyone in their fourth or fifth semester at AELO Swiss Academy about their first few weeks, and you will usually get the same soft laugh. Not because anything went wrong, exactly. It is more that the first semester arrives with a strange intensity that nobody warns you about, and it only makes sense once you are on the other side of it.

We are a group of seniors who were asked to write down what we wish we had known. Some of us arrived from nearby, some flew in with two suitcases and a season of jet lag, and all of us remember standing in the corridor on arrival day, holding a room key and wondering whether everyone else had already figured something out. They had not. Here is what we learned, slowly and mostly by getting small things wrong first.

the first fortnight feels louder than it is

Everything registers at full volume in the beginning. The bell schedule, the smell of the dining hall, the way people greet each other in three languages, the mountains sitting quietly at the edge of your vision. Your brain is processing a new country, a new academic system, and a new social world all at once, and it will feel like more than you can hold. That is normal, and it settles.

The most useful thing one of us was told early on came from a fifth-semester student who said, almost in passing, that you should not judge your semester until week six. She was right. The first two weeks are noisy, the next two are exhausting, and somewhere around the fifth or sixth week the place starts to feel like yours. If you make big decisions about whether you fit in during week one, you will be judging a draft, not the finished thing.

Practically, that means protecting the basics while everything else is in motion. Eat at regular times even if the dining hall feels overwhelming. Sleep, even if your corridor is lively and you are afraid of missing something. There will be plenty of semester left for the lively parts.

learn the rhythm before you try to bend it

Every campus has a rhythm, and AELO Swiss Academy is no exception. There are windows when the dining hall is calm and windows when it is a tide of people. There are hours when the study rooms sit empty and hours when you cannot find a seat. The laundry room, in our experience, is fully booked by early evening, and the people who figure that out in week one never queue in a panic again.

Switzerland adds its own layer to this. Things start on the minute. If a class begins at nine, the room is settled at nine, and arriving at nine feels late even when it technically is not. Quiet hours are taken seriously in residential buildings across the country, and life runs more smoothly when you treat them as a given rather than a suggestion. Recycling has rules and people follow them, and nobody will lecture you about it, but you will notice the difference between someone who learned the system and someone who did not.

None of this is a constraint in a bad sense. There is something genuinely calming about a place where the trains leave when they say they will, where the shop closes when the sign says it closes. Let the rhythm carry you for a while before you decide which parts of it you want to push against.

your room is your base camp, so set it up early

One quiet mistake almost all of us made: living out of the suitcase for two weeks or more. Unpack everything, even if the wardrobe is small and the room is modest. A room that feels settled does something to your head that a half-open suitcase never will. Put one familiar object on the desk in the first week. A photo, a scarf, a mug from home. It sounds sentimental, and it works.

Then there is the roommate question, if you have one. Most friction between roommates is not about big values. It is about alarms, lights, windows, and guests. Talk about those small things early, in plain words, before they become resentments. Two of us once shared a room where the entire conflict history came down to one window. One person wanted it open at night, the other wanted it closed, and it took an awkward month before they agreed on a simple rule. A five-minute conversation in week one would have saved the whole month.

You do not need to become best friends with your roommate. You need a workable peace, and that comes from clarity, not from politeness that avoids the topic.

money: switzerland does not really do discounts

The first grocery run is a rite of passage. Migros and Coop are everywhere and their quality is good, but the total at the till has a way of climbing. In our first months, cooking simply and mostly from the shared kitchen, most of us landed somewhere between 40 and 70 francs a week for food. Denner, Aldi, and Lidl trim that number noticeably if you are flexible about brands. Tap water is excellent, which is one habit that costs nothing.

Two things worth knowing beyond groceries. First, most shops close on Sundays, so plan your weekend food around that rather than discovering it hungry on a Sunday evening. Second, if you plan to travel at all, look into the half-fare options for Swiss trains early in the semester. For anyone taking a few longer trips, they tend to pay for themselves quickly.

Keep a small buffer for the things nobody budgets for. A charger that dies, a dentist, a warm jacket bought in a hurry when the temperature drops faster than your packing assumed. The buffer is not pessimism. It is what lets an unexpected cost stay an annoyance instead of becoming a crisis.

the timetable is a contract, treat it like one

Academic advice from seniors tends to sound similar because it keeps being true. The library and study rooms fill up before dinner, so the students who claim a slot in the late afternoon almost always work with fewer interruptions. Find yourself a second place that is not your room and not the library. A corner of the dining hall at a quiet hour, a bench that gets afternoon sun, wherever your brain associates with focus. Rooms are for rest, and mixing the two makes both harder.

One habit carried more of us through the first semester than any study technique: reviewing your notes within a day of the class. Not rewriting them, not building a beautiful system, just looking at them again while they are still warm. It takes twenty minutes and it quietly changes how exam season feels.

And ask the students a year ahead of you. At AELO Swiss Academy, the informal knowledge that passes down corridors, which professors explain things twice, which weeks get heavy, which electors are worth the workload, is real and generous. Seniors remember being new. Most of them will happily talk for an hour if you buy them a coffee.

homesickness runs on a schedule

Almost everyone we know hit a dip somewhere between weeks three and six. The novelty wears off, the workload arrives, and home becomes very vivid. Sunday evenings are the hardest, and it helps enormously to know that in advance, because a hard Sunday evening that you expected is just an evening, while one that ambushes you feels like proof that something is wrong.

What helped us was structure rather than willpower. Calling home at set times instead of constantly, which keeps the call a pleasure instead of a lifeline. Cooking one dish from home and sharing it on the corridor, which turns homesickness into a small event. Going outside every day, even when the weather argues with you. The Swiss winter gets short on daylight, and a walk before the afternoon fades does more for your mood than any amount of scrolling.

If the heaviness lasts longer than a few weeks, or starts to interfere with sleep and classes, say something early. There are people whose role is exactly this, and asking is not a dramatic step. Every senior here knows someone who waited too long and wishes they had not. Treat it like any other practical problem: sooner is easier.



friends come from repetition, not effort

Nobody becomes friends through a determined push. Friendship here, as almost anywhere, grows out of repeated low-stakes contact. The same table at dinner. The same study room at the same hour. The club you joined half out of curiosity. After a few weeks of that, a walk into town with someone from the corridor stops being a plan and starts being a habit, and that is usually where the real thing begins.

Two notes from experience. First, local students can seem reserved at first, and that reserve is not distance. Give it time and the friendships that form tend to be steady ones. Second, if your German or French is shaky, offer a language exchange. Half the students want the same thing in reverse, and it is the least awkward way to talk to strangers, because you both have an obvious job to do.

weekends: trains, mountains, and the value of staying put

The trains will spoil you. They are punctual to the point of being a small daily lesson in how systems feel when they work, and from most Swiss towns you can reach a lake, a ridge, or another country's border within an afternoon. Check the Sunday situation for anything involving shops, and check the weather for anything involving altitude, because mountain forecasts deserve respect even on modest trails.



The trade-off worth naming is rest. It is tempting to turn every weekend into a trip, especially in the first months when everything is photographable. What we learned, some of us the hard way, is that travel lands better in doses. One weekend out, one weekend on campus, and the semester keeps its footing. The students who burnt out first were rarely the ones studying the most. They were the ones who never let a weekend be quiet.

a short checklist for your first week

Small things, done early, that paid off for all of us.

- walk your route to the first class once before it counts
- learn two names on your corridor and use them the next day
- find one quiet study spot that is not the library
- work out the laundry booking and the recycling point on day one
- unpack fully and put one familiar object on your desk

None of these takes more than an hour. Together, they quietly change how the whole month feels.

what we would tell our first-semester selves

The semester has a shape, and knowing the shape removes most of the fear. Weeks one and two are loud. Somewhere in the middle it gets heavy, and that is the same for everyone, including the people who look effortless. By the second half, the place is familiar enough that you stop performing and start belonging, usually without noticing the exact moment it happened.



Be patient with the rhythm, generous with the people, and honest early when something feels off. The advice above is not a system. It is just what [reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com) a handful of seniors at AELO Swiss Academy wish someone had told us while we were still living out of our suitcases, wondering if everyone else had it figured out. They did not. You will, and sooner than you think.