

# Study skills for success

**O**ne lesson that few of us are taught in school is how to study. There is often little difficulty in finding out what has to be studied because that is clearly outlined in the course syllabus but the how of studying is often left to each student's own devices. Assumptions are made that by the time we all get to university, by some miraculous process we will know how to study. In this article however, the aim is to remind you of a few key study skills that are fundamental to your making a success of your studies.

## Self-evaluation

**B**efore you even start to think about how to improve your existing study skills, you need to stop and assess your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to study. In order to gather concrete evidence to support your statements about your strengths and weaknesses, draw up a chart using the following as headings:

- ▶ Study skills
- ▶ Skill level
- ▶ Evidence
- ▶ Action points.

When you've finished reading the

article, use the action points column to identify strategies for addressing your weaknesses or building on your strengths.

## Learning styles

**W**hen you reflect on how you actually learn, which aspect of studying do you enjoy the most? Do you enjoy group work and participating in discussion or are you more of a loner who prefers working alone in the library? There are in fact many ways in which people learn and everyone has a preferred learning style.

At school you were probably taught using the chalk and talk method which matches only one style of learning. At university you are more likely to encounter more variety in the way you can learn and at work a whole new world of learning through actually doing opens up to you. If you are aware of your dominant learning

STUDY SKILL	SKILL LEVEL Strength, Weakness	EVIDENCE	ACTION POINTS
Time Management	Weakness	Always rushing to meet deadlines	
Note taking	Strength	Notes make sense	
		Notes useful for revision	

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style you can capitalise on that form of learning and use it to increase your ability to actively learn. For example, if you prefer discussion around a subject as opposed to sitting through a two-hour lecture, you could arrange to start a study group with friends. Alternatively, if you prefer lectures rather than discussion, you could make more use of audio or video lectures.

### Time management

As a student you have a clear goal in mind - to achieve a qualification. One key resource you have at your disposal is time. In order to achieve your goal you need to get the best out of your time by setting yourself priorities and targets. Organise priorities first on a weekly basis then on a daily basis. As you select priorities, identify the activities that will help you reach your goals. For example, to achieve a good exam result your necessary activities are classes, revision and coursework. Your classes will already be timetabled, but you need to work out a timetable for those activities that have not been scheduled. Your schedule should allow you to see what you are supposed to be doing at any given time – and that includes relaxing.

Although you might be tempted into writing out a daily “to do” list, there is a danger that the list will become just a random list of things that you have to do. Working on the basis of priorities for the week and then the day, will force you to organise yourself around priorities and spend time pursuing those activities that will help you achieve your goal. It’s also useful to allocate deadlines for activities so that you don’t squander time. However, do be realistic when you estimate the time it will take to complete an activity and do not be too rigid with your time scheduling. Always allow for the unexpected.

One other useful tip to remember is that procrastination is one of time’s greatest enemies. If there is no reason why you shouldn’t do something today, then don’t put it off until tomorrow.

### Writing skills

Being able to write effectively is a very useful study and life skill. If you can produce written work that is fluent and readable you will not only perfect your self-expression skills, but you will also be able to gauge your understanding of a subject and use your written work for revision purposes. Written work is also useful to your tutors because it helps them assess your progress.

The basic structure of good writing is always the same. It has a beginning, middle and an end. Think for a moment about any good articles you’ve read recently. The article will have opened with an introduction which no doubt grabbed your attention, then it will have progressed to the middle and finally everything will have been tied up with a conclusion.

Whenever you receive a written assignment such as a dissertation or research essay, always make sure that you understand what you’re been asked to do. Once you understand the set task, devise an action plan to accomplish it. First, you need to do your research and gather information, next you need to think of how to structure the information in a logical format.

The content of your written work should be based on facts and arguments supported by evidence. Structure your writing so that you concentrate on one key point per paragraph and use clear and simple language and sentence structure. It’s helpful to start with a draft which you can fine tune later before submitting your final edited version. Reading out your work aloud is another way of doing one final test for coherence and fluency. If what you have written doesn’t make sense to you, it won’t make sense to anyone else.

### Information searching

The library should be central to your life as a student. If it isn’t, it ought to be. In the last few years, libraries have been

through a dramatic transformation. In fact, at many universities they have been re-branded as learning centres or learning and resource centres. However, to avoid confusion we’ll refer to them as libraries for now. Your library will offer not only sources of information but also tools for retrieving information such as the catalogue, the internet or bibliographies. Try to become familiar with the various information sources available in your library and also the academic librarian responsible for your area of study. Many university libraries produce subject guides which list key information sources so there may be one that specifically covers pharmacy or a more general subject area such as science.

Although libraries have traditionally been associated with books, books do have limitations. It can take years for a book to get into print therefore information contained in a book can quite quickly be superseded. Think about the progress in computing technology over the past 10 years. Many books published on computing technology in 1998 will already be out of date. In fact for any scientific subject you need to concentrate on researching journals. These are printed much more quickly than books, and are usually dedicated to very specialised areas. Whenever a scientist comes up with new research, his first port of call will be a scientific journal. For your subject it would be a publication like *The Pharmaceutical Journal*.

The internet has certainly revolutionised the way we conduct research and information searches that used to take hours of looking through masses of paper can now be carried out in minutes. However, caution is required with internet information. Unlike an article in a scientific journal, which has been checked and edited by experts before being published, the internet is a free-for-all when it comes to publishing. Anyone can set up a website and make information publicly available. Therefore it’s important to always check the credentials of website authors and dates of publication of website articles.

When searching for information from any source, whether it's printed or online, always think in terms of key words before you commence your search. It's also important to identify alternative words, such as Americanisms or synonyms. And never rely on your memory for finding an information source. Always make a note of what you found and where you found it and make sure you write down enough detail to enable you to find it again.

## Reading skills

As a student you will have masses of books, articles and reports to read and you must be able to vary your reading technique. Reading textbooks the way you read novels is obviously not appropriate for academic study, nor is it efficient. Therefore, you need to be aware of the different methods of reading that are at your disposal. In addition to reading for pleasure as you would do when reading a novel, you also need to master the art of skim and scan reading. This is the type of reading you use when you're looking for specific key words and phrases in a piece of text.

Reading for study is the technique that requires the most concentration because it requires reading for understanding. This means that you might need to repeat and

review your reading to make sure you have grasped a subject. Reviewing what you have read and taking notes of main points as you study will aid your memory recall.

## Examination technique

Exam success is the culmination of all your study skills but it still requires the application of skills and technique. The most important skill to start with is time management. As soon as you receive the exam timetable start planning your revision and identify tasks, support and resources needed in order to prepare for your exams.

The best strategies for revision involve active learning rather than just absorption of information. Use mind mapping, diagrams, pictures and pyramids of facts to aid your memory and recall. Other useful techniques for memorising information include using index cards to note key points and using abbreviations, acronyms and phrases.

Visualising is another technique that can aid memory recall. It works on the basis of attaching a picture or image to words or phrases. You can test your understanding and memory by explaining key principles or theories of a subject to a friend.

It's also worth digging out some old exam papers to get an idea of the exam format and structure and also to practise answering exam questions within time constraints.

As to the amount of material to revise, you have to make an informed choice. It will depend on how your exam is structured and on whether any subjects are core subjects. Ask your lecturer as many questions as you can about the exam and the criteria for not only passing but for excelling.

When it comes to the actual exam, read the instructions carefully and make sure you understand what you are being asked to do. Look at the questions and start with the easiest to give yourself a confidence boost. Then check the marks allocated to each question so that you don't spend too much time answering a question that will only give you a few marks. Time manage the exam by allocating time for planning how you intend to answer the questions, for answering each question, and for reviewing your answers. If the exam is based on answering multiple choice questions, make sure you indicate your answers as instructed (eg, tick, circle, etc).

As for exam nerves, it's only natural to feel stressed before an exam but advanced preparation and the use of good techniques will help reduce your stress levels.

## Summary

Thankfully, universities are waking up to the fact that even in higher education, students need study support. As a result many academic libraries now offer a whole bank of study skills resources and in some cases offer dedicated study support. Ask one of your university librarians for information about local study skills resources. ✕

## Further reading

*Sue Drew and Rose Bingham. The Student Skills Guide. 2nd edition. Hampshire: Gower; 2001.*