

# **Studying**

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## How to study

### You And Studying<sup>1</sup>

You have to find your own 'best way' to study and discover what suits your personality and available time the best.

The following is a set of points that most people find work well for them. Try them and if they work, great. If some of them do not work for you, try something else.

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#### Strategies

When reading anything for study purposes, rather than say a novel for pleasure, you should have a pen (or tape recorder) in one hand, or at least within easy reach, and a pad of paper beside you.

You should note the main ideas if the topic or the ideas are new to you. If you are familiar with the topic, you might choose only to mark the new or controversial points made, as you will use the material as an alternate view, or perhaps to argue against later.

You should reread your notes for each subject often, doing this by section. It is better to read your module notes and all other notes devoted to one section or topic, then move on to another. This is a good reason for keeping module and other notes together. Remember that you do not learn something merely by possessing it. Hard work is required to learn something. The importance of reading and rereading your notes cannot be over-stressed. If you think of this as meaning constant revision, then fine, just make sure you do it.

#### Concentrating While You Study

This section has suggestions for studying effectively in study sessions for at least an hour. These sessions might include reading, notetaking, writing, organising or editing

material, or listening to tapes. Concentrating during a lecture or while working with other people involves similar principles.

Concentrating is not always something that you have to work at. If you really want to know something you can concentrate easily, possibly for a long time. If you are required to learn about a topic which doesn't particularly interest you (and let's face it, a certain amount of any course is about jumping through hoops) you need to figure how to keep motivated. Sometimes you have to study for a purpose which doesn't coincide with yours, or if you have to study at times or in ways which are difficult for you, then you have to make an effort to focus and sustain your concentration.

The length of time for which you can concentrate fully depends on factors such as your enthusiasm for what you are doing, your skill at a particular task, your emotional and physical state, and your surroundings at the time. You don't have to sit at a desk to concentrate. Why not let your ideas sort themselves out while you do the housework, travel to work or watch the sunset? When you do read and write, concentrating is not simply reading every word on a page or putting lots of words on paper or a computer screen.

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<sup>1</sup> This guide has been adapted from the web site of Charles Sturt University student services ([www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/index.htm](http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/learning/index.htm)), which in turn has drawn on material from Australian universities and other sources for advice and examples. Particular mention must be made of the following: Bucknall, K.B. (1995) How to succeed as a student. Griffith University: [http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/stubod/stuadv/stu\\_advice.html](http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/stubod/stuadv/stu_advice.html) Lovell, D.W. (1995) Essay writing for students in politics and the social sciences. Australian Defence Force Academy: <http://www.pol.adfa.oz.au/essay.intro.html> Nothedge A. (1990) The good study guide. Open University: Milton Keynes, U.K.

**Full concentration involves actively questioning your material and integrating it into what you already know.**

This questioning and integrating helps you understand what you read and organise what you write. **It also helps you when you share your ideas and knowledge with others.**

Have you consciously thought about your study habits; when, where and how you prefer to study. You can concentrate for longer periods and more effectively if you know how to cope with distraction that may arise at certain points in your study. While preparing for study you may be prone to procrastination. After you have been concentrating intensely for a short time you may become impatient with your task. After sustained concentrated work, you may feel that you are reaching the end of your concentration span for a particular subject.

**If You Have Difficulty Getting Started**

1. Consider how you feel emotionally and physically. If you feel good direct this energy to learning. If you don't plan another time to study, or use techniques that deal with or set your problems aside. Try a brief walk or run, a cup of coffee, or a short chat.
2. Seat yourself comfortably, with everything you need at hand.
3. Decide on your time limits for this study session. Take into account your other commitments, then set a minimum study time to become involved. Set a maximum time so you don't feel overwhelmed and so you focus yourself fully. Don't be inflexible, and plan to reward yourself after you have completed your study by doing something you particularly enjoy.
4. Decide what to study while your mind is fresh. Will you tackle an assignment that has been worrying you? Will you start with the subject or activity you find the easiest?
5. Set yourself a goal to accomplish. If you have a large task, tackle it one section at a time.
6. Begin with a brief warm up task which helps you concentrate. Use this task only if necessary, not as a form of procrastination.
7. Do some routine tasks which are part of the subject, such as filing or compiling notes.
8. Revise previous work in the area, for example summarise notes, write comments on a discussion or reading.
9. Preview a topic by asking yourself 'why am I studying this topic?' 'to whom do I want to communicate my ideas?'

**Problems**

Identifying your procrastination habit:

- Day dreaming - staring into space
- Inaction - sitting at desk, vegetating in front of TV.
- Inappropriate action : avoidance tasks - making coffee, phone calls
- Making numerous lists, timetables, planners.
- Organising and reorganising notes
- Stuck in the reading or research phase - doing unnecessary reading

**Solutions**

- Start writing - put pen to paper
- Have all that you need on the desk
- For a task (assignment) which you just cannot start, choose one achievable section, - one small step !
- If losing concentration, change topics
- Set yourself small timed goals

**Make daily 'to do' lists; what must be done today ?**

- Put on the list things that are achievable
- Put the list in a place that you will see it often- wall, mirror, phone etc.
- During the day look at the list
- DO one thing, cross it out
- At the end of the day - cross out what you have done.

**Study Groups**

**Even if you are studying away from a campus this doesn't mean that you have to feel isolated. It's important that you get to meet (via telephone or electronic mail) other students doing your course. Contact the University to find out how to contact students doing the same subject as you, or who live near you. You can help one another with an assignment, offer support and**

encouragement or share resources. Perhaps you can arrange to drive to residential school together (if there is one), or just have a chat and share your experiences about studying part time. It's up to you to initiate contact.

### **Teleconferences**

With distance education, sometimes a lecturer may want to hold a discussion group with students. Because you are all located in different places, a good way of getting together is via the telephone. A group of people linked via their telephone at home is teleconference or a teletutorial. If this is going to happen you should receive information about when it's held (usually in the evening), how to prepare for it and the

names of the other students participating.

### **Bulletin Boards**

These are a form of electronic communication requiring a computer, modem and communications software. Not all lecturers use bulletin boards for students in their class. Your lecturer will advise you if you will be expected to participate.

### **Videoconferences**

These are another form of electronic communication where groups of students at different sites can see and speak to each other. Your lecturer will advise you if there is to be one organised for your subject.

## How to study II

### Building On What You Already Know

You need to learn by building on your skills and experience, on the patterns and beliefs which shape your world and language. Even if you only know a little about a new area, having a context in which to understand your new learning helps you remember it more clearly. One of the most powerful tools to help you remember unfamiliar material is linking it to familiar information and concepts.

An example of this is pre-reading, skimming or previewing lengthy articles. By reading the chapter outline, skimming the chapter paying special attention to the headings of main sections and sub-sections, glancing at pictures and illustrations, and reading the summary at the end of the chapter to get an idea of major topics.

### Selecting what To Learn

It is essential that you consciously select what you want to remember. As a student you are confronted with large amounts of information and there is little point in trying to remember it all. You will need to remember the concepts, theories and ideas developed in your course, and be able to recall sufficient detail to explain them. In exams you may need to write an essay showing you understand the concept or you may need to show that you can apply the concepts in practical situations.

### Learning Thoroughly

The importance of learning your notes by constantly rereading them, cannot be over-emphasised. Information and knowledge are the basis you need for subsequent critical evaluation. When going through a textbook or reading a journal article, you should try to understand it and then question what you understand. You should never reject a viewpoint or idea merely because it is new, differs from something you already believe, or lecturers say. In particular, do not reject something because it seems difficult and you cannot understand it. If you encounter this situation, it means you must work harder at it. Read it through several times. If it is the textbook that is causing you trouble, try one or two different textbooks to see how they explain the point, as things often seem easier if put in a different way. You might also find a Dictionary of Economics (Sociology or whatever the subject) helpful, as such books summarise ideas in a short space using simple words.

### Take in the same information as many ways

**as possible. Draw diagrams, read about a topic and discuss it. Explain it to somebody else.**

A good way of learning is to read something, note (or underline) the major points, then go off and explain what the main points are to a friend (the cat will do). An effort to teach something focuses your attention on the subject, really reinforces the information in your memory, and also reveals to you any weak areas of your knowledge. Your small study group (via telephone or computer) is a good outlet for this approach.

Condensing or reducing your notes is a good thing to do: the process reinforces the information and helps to fix it in your head. In addition, the shorter summary version can be read more quickly and learned more easily. Some students find that it helps to reduce the summary down to several key words, in the same order as the more full notes, then learn them. Bringing back the list of key words then helps them to recall the fuller notes.

I have in the past found it useful, after reading a journal article or a book chapter, to write a brief one-page synopsis of the article. It made a great revision aid at exam time.

### Try to learn something each day

It is not possible to study continually without a break and it is not an efficient use of your time to try to do so.

Your concentration is reduced and you get less out of what you are doing. Try to discover your own optimal time and make use of the information. After the hour's study (or whatever), you should try to do something different for say ten or twenty minutes, e.g., have a cup of coffee, dig the garden, or polish the furniture - it is a good time to do those short domestic tasks that need doing but which seem to get overlooked a lot. Then after this break, you can go back to the studying refreshed.

**Many people find that the optimal period for them to study is somewhere between three quarters of an hour and an hour and a half.**

If you take a coffee break, try to keep it down to ten minutes or so. Always remember that you are responsible for using your time in the most productive way. You get the rewards for doing

this successfully, and conversely you get the pain for failure.

It is often useful to set aside a short period every day to read over your recent notes, do some revision of a subject (a different one each day) and to draw diagrams or approach your work in a novel way. Perhaps half an hour after or before a meal would suit you. Try to find the time that fits your routine the best. Some students find that reading the textbook in bed last thing at night helps.

It is desirable to develop a study pattern or habit, know your favourite places and how best to arrange your books, note pad etc. around you so that you feel comfortable and at home. Equally you should be prepared to study under conditions that are far from the best for you, learning to close your mind and ears to your environment. An hour's study under what you regard as poor conditions is better than no study at all.

You might usefully consider the question of what time of day you study the best: are you essentially a night person or a day person? Some people work well until late in the evening and even after midnight. Others seem to work better in the day.

If you can quickly relax from tension before you study, you will do better in the long run. There are various relaxation techniques around, and just about all of them seem to work.

Many students find it helpful to look at the end of each chapter of their set textbook, or a different textbook if necessary, where there are often questions for discussion or typical questions about the material of the chapter. They then try to answer them. Even as little as ten minutes each day can be very helpful, thinking about the issue, and jotting down what you can recall or can think of, then checking back with the text itself to see how well you did. Preparing a short skeleton answer is perhaps the best method. You can file these skeletons, after adding to them if needs be, by checking the textbook, along with your notes for that topic. If you are a member of a self-organised study group, you can compare notes and discuss discrepancies, and this practice will reinforce the learning process.

Getting hold of old exam papers and trying them is a valuable study strategy, especially towards the end of a semester when exams approach

(see the distance education manual for order forms).

If you have a large chunk of time in which to study, say a morning or an evening, then it is often better to spend it on two or three different study tasks, or study related tasks, in order to give yourself a break. For most people it seems to be more productive to study, say, economics for an hour, switch to psychology for an hour, relax with a non-alcoholic drink for fifteen minutes, then spend the last three quarters of an hour revising their notes. This is better than trying to devote three straight hours to one subject without a break.

If you have a spare ten or twenty minutes, try to use that time to do one short task, for example; read, review and think about the notes taken yesterday.

**Making use of small amounts of spare time is a valuable way of improving performance.**

Because the mind is fresh and knows that the process will shortly be over, it seems to take things in quickly and you might find you remember them better.

Mnemonics are methods for remembering information that is otherwise quite difficult to recall. A very simple example of a mnemonic is the '30 days hath September' rhyme. You can utilise mnemonic strategies such as studying in unusual places. For example leaning against the inside of the front door can be used to recall learning. Leaning on the door can bring back the details of what you were studying at the time. It is using the ten minutes productively that really counts.

If you travel by public transport to and from work this is an excellent time to review notes, plan out an essay or memorise definitions. Staring out the window at the same old view will not help your progress.

**One important and often missed way of improving your learning is to read carefully the comments on your essays made by the marker.**

**Learn as you go. Do not wait until just before exams and then try to cram. You are at university to learn and use the information, to widen your mind and horizons, to enjoy the intellectual stimulation, to struggle with the new and come to terms with it.**