

Study Skills Advice

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Getting Organised for Study

Finding time for study and utilising that time effectively are challenges commonly faced by part-time students. It pays to get organised. As a result you will feel more confident about tackling your study tasks and achieve more in the time available to you. You may find some of the following strategies helpful.

Time Allocation

- Timetable your study hours in advance - weekly, monthly, termly - using a flexible or rigid approach depending on your lifestyle
- Try to include some fairly long periods of time for study. Single hours are useful for some study tasks e.g. reading, sorting notes, planning an assignment, but not for writing assignments, revising for exams etc.
- Establish when you produce your best work (morning/afternoon/evening). Try to allocate some periods of time to study when you will be able to work at peak performance e.g. weekends rather than in the evening after work
- Include some extra hours which can be allocated to study if you fall behind
- Try to undertake at least one or two hours work per week during difficult periods and vacations in order to maintain the continuity of your study
- Establish good working habits from the beginning - start work immediately, discourage interruptions etc.
- Take short planned breaks during long study periods.
- Producing your assessed assignments is an important task but remember to leave time for other course work, especially reading and making notes on other topics studied
- Remember to schedule time for recreation!

Task Allocation

- Plan your work in advance and allocate tasks to time slots.
- Ensure that you have the books and other material you need each week before you start work.

Be realistic

- Set yourself attainable targets.
- Recognise your strengths and weaknesses and make allowance for them.

Reading for Study

Objective

All students need to read academic texts in order to develop their understanding of the subject they are studying, but reading can be extremely time consuming. It is therefore essential to develop effective reading skills in order to make the best use of the time you are able to invest in reading.

Before tackling a book or article you need to establish why you need to read it and what information you want from it. Is your aim to obtain:

- a broad overview of the subject?
- a detailed knowledge of the subject?
- answers to specific questions?

You also need to take into account the information you already have on the subject and whether it is substantially different from the new material you are proposing to read. You may only need to read one or two important texts thoroughly and merely dip into others.

Approaches to Reading

- Reading selected passages
- Skimming quickly through the whole text
- Making a careful and detailed study of the text

It is important to select the appropriate approach or combination of approaches to suit your objective.

Stages in Reading

1. Survey the text

- Establish the aims of the author and the overall structure of the text by studying the preface, introduction, contents page, headings, summaries and conclusion.

2. Define the task

- Decide whether to skim or read in detail or a combination.
- Use the contents page and index to select those sections which you need to read in greater depth in order to evaluate and understand them.
- Divide the reading into manageable sections.

Skimming through the text

- Scan the pages quickly to get a brief overview of the topics covered and argument presented or to find specific information.
- Concentrate on the introduction and conclusion, the first and last paragraph in every chapter and the first sentence in every paragraph.
- Look for key words.

3. Detailed reading

- Develop questions to explore.
- Read the text, in sections if necessary.
- Try to recall the main points of what you have read.
- Reread the text and make notes.
- Review your notes against the text.

This will enable you:

- to gain a full understanding of section read.
- to understand detailed and difficult points.
- to get to grips with the structure and development of the argument.

4. Critical reading

It is important - and in some disciplines essential - that you adopt a critical approach to reading. This will enable you:

- to establish what position the author is adopting.
- to distinguish fact from opinion.
- to explore your own response to the material.
- to develop your own writing style.

Common Reading Problems

- Coping with the quantity of reading required
- Poor concentration
- Tackling difficult material
- Remembering what has been read

Coping

You may feel overwhelmed by the reading lists provided at the beginning of your course, or when an assignment is set, and by the amount of reading you are apparently required to tackle. There are a number of coping strategies you can employ:

- Select the most relevant texts. Seek guidance from your tutor if necessary.
- Select the most appropriate reading method.
- Remember that articles often provide a valuable (and short, if concentrated) summary of the writer's views on a relatively limited subject.
- Define your reading tasks and set realistic targets, reviewing them as necessary.
- Employ techniques to improving your reading speed e.g. avoid vocalising, reduce pauses, resist the temptation to regress etc.

Remember that the objective of reading effectively is not to read every word but to extract the facts and ideas needed.

Improving concentration

Students often find it difficult to concentrate on reading academic texts for long periods. Again you may find the following strategies useful:

- Build up your reading time gradually. Take short breaks to relax.
- Take brief notes to maintain active involvement and improve understanding.
- Create an interest by developing questions to answer as you read.
- Choose the time and place to read carefully.

Tackling difficult material

If you have not studied in higher education before, the style, layout and language of academic books may be unfamiliar to you. Academic writing often seems overly complicated and longwinded because it seeks to present and evaluate a series of arguments in an objective and logical way. You may find this disconcerting at first, particularly if you are also required to cope with specialist vocabulary. You may find it useful to:

- Skim through the text and get an overall view of the main points and ideas.
- Rereading may make the difficult parts easier to understand.
- Make notes or draw a diagram. Putting difficult ideas into your own words or structure may also make them easier to understand.
- Look up unknown word in the dictionary and make a glossary of frequently used specialist terms for your own reference.

Remembering what has been read

You may worry that you can't recall much of what you have read. Don't forget:

- you don't need to remember everything you have read - understanding what you have read is more important.
- your notes will provide a record of the facts and ideas extracted.

Taking Notes

Objective

Taking notes ranges from scribbling down a few points to recording a detailed account of an argument. In order to decide how (form and quantity) to make your notes you need first of all to identify why you are making the notes.

- To make your own personal record of the material.
- To gather key points and evidence for essay writing, making a presentation.
- To collect or condense material for revision.
- To turn learning into an active experience.

When to take notes

Notes are most commonly taken from books and journals but you may also wish to take notes from discussion on the WebBoard, from the spoken word in audiographic presentations or in lectures and seminars at the Summer School. Taking notes from books and journals is easiest because you can skim the text to establish the overall structure of the reasoning and to identify the main ideas. Taking notes during lectures and from audio-visual material is more difficult because you are required to simultaneously listen/watch, analyse, select and record.

Methods of taking notes

1. Outline notes

- Record structure of reasoning or evidence and the main points
- Use headings, numeration, bullet points etc to provide hierarchy of points
- Use regular abbreviations and symbols

2. Summary notes

- Provide condensed version of reasoning

3. Flow diagrams

- Record development of main reasoning/evidence and points

4. Mind map (spider diagram, spray diagram)

- Summarise main topic and enclose in box or circle
- Draw radiating lines to sub-topics and again to sub-sub topics etc.
- Useful for analysing ideas

5. Other strategies - Highlighting and underlining

- Focuses attention
- Encourages you to identify and think about main points
- Directs re-reading

Advantages gained from taking notes

- Focuses attention on text or lecture
- Encourages active involvement and promotes understanding because you have to select what to write and how to write it
- Aids concentration and recall
- Provides an auxiliary memory bank allowing access to a wider range of ideas and facts than you could commit to memory
- Provides a useful method of preparation for assignment writing and examinations

Helpful Hints

- Record source of notes at top of page.
- If taking notes from a book in preparation for writing an assignment, record page numbers for reference purposes.
- Record your own comments in a box so that you can identify them later.
- Neat notes are most useful.
- File notes in an organised system in order to retrieve easily.

Common Problems

Students often worry that they are taking too many or too few notes. Too few is often preferable to too many, particularly when the points noted are carefully selected, since this allows you to concentrate on understanding the book or lecture. Much depends, however, on whether you will be able to have access to the same or similar information in the future. You may also worry whether you are making the right notes. What to write down is a personal decision (although the course material may provide some guidance by listing main points) but remember that selecting and ordering points takes practice. It is often useful to review your notes periodically to check how useful they are and whether you need to modify your approach.

Remember

- Notes should not be a shorthand version of the text or lecture.
- Notes should provide an outline of the reasoning, main points and useful examples.
- Notes should reflect you own ideas and methodology.

A Guide to Assignment Writing

Why write assignments?

Writing is an essential part of the learning process. It provides an incentive for you to master particular topics and concepts. It encourages you to develop your powers of self-expression and your ability to communicate your ideas and reasoning in written form. It enables you to demonstrate your competence in these skills and allows assessment of your progress.

The process of assignment writing can be divided into the following stages:

1. Examining the assignment question

Read the question several times and think about it carefully. Ask yourself:

- What is it asking me to do?
- What material do I need to cover?
- What form should my answer take?

Identify the key (process) words and phrases in the question. Common examples include:

Account for/Why	Explain, clarify, give reasons for
Assess/Evaluate	Make an appraisal of worth /validity/ effectiveness
How far/To what extent	Consider and weigh evidence/arguments for and against
What	Identify, describe and evaluate
Discuss	Explain, present and appraise opposing views

Ensure that you understand the meaning of any unusual or specialised words and phrases and the context in which they are being used in the question.

2. Producing a Preliminary Plan and Collecting Material

It is important to produce a preliminary plan for your written answer at an early stage. This will enable you to research the question purposefully, and discourage you from wasting time by reading everything associated with the topic and wondering whether it is relevant, and whether you should include it. Be clear in your own mind what the purpose of the question is, and what **you** consider are the main issues which need to be addressed. Aim to gather material for the individual sections of your answer you have identified in your outline plan. Select relevant materials, making notes which will help you to answer the question and pursue the lines of approach that **you** think are important. Remember to record the source of your notes, together with page references.

3. Organising the Material

Once you have gathered your material you will need to review and organise it.

- Check that your material supports your planned answer to the question and modify your argument if necessary.
- Select and order your main points. Decide whether you need to adopt a comprehensive approach or focus on a narrower range of issues in order to cover them in greater depth.
- Select your sub-points and the evidence to support your main points.
- Estimate the likely length of your answer and check that it will meet course requirements. You may be penalised for submitting significantly an essay which is significantly too long or too short.

4. Starting Writing

Many students find it difficult to start writing an answer. You may find it convenient to write your introduction first, but it is not essential to start at the beginning. Select part of your argument that you feel comfortable with and start to jot down your ideas, gradually weaving them into a logical sequence of clear and carefully considered points, backed up by supporting evidence.

It is important to use your own words to present your argument, not only in order to avoid plagiarising someone else's work, but also to demonstrate to yourself and to your tutor that you have mastered the concepts and evidence that you are handling. It is, however, both effective and useful - and in some disciplines essential - to use direct verbatim quotation to make a point or to support your argument but remember to acknowledge the source of your quotation.

Writing style is a matter of personal preference and competence, and a skill which is developed over time and with practice. In general, however, since academics strive to be objective in their interpretation of evidence and fair to all sides of an argument, it is preferable to write in the detached third person rather than in the more personal first person.

5. Writing the Introduction and Conclusion

A punchy introduction catches the attention of the reader but remember that you also need:

- to restate or redefine the question posed (e.g. define contentious words/phrases or specify restrictions).
- to engage with the topic.
- to establish your approach to the question.
- to provide any necessary background or context.

Similarly an interesting and thoughtful conclusion makes a good final impression upon the reader but do not forget to:

- summarise your argument and demonstrate that you have answered the question.

- identify wider implications, future trends or issues/areas worthy of further consideration.
- avoid introducing new arguments or material.

6. Writing and Reviewing a First Draft

If you have time, it is useful to produce a first draft of your answer. (This is usually quite easy if you are using a word processor) As you write, try to keep in mind the underlying structure of your argument. Present each point of your argument logically and precisely, restricting yourself to one main point per paragraph or two paragraphs. This will enable you to develop each point (together with any relevant sub-points) sufficiently and to cite supporting evidence. Remember to use linking phrases to ensure that your argument flows smoothly and signposting phrases to indicate the progress and direction of your argument. Most importantly, check that you have answered the question!

In reviewing your first draft you may find it necessary to:

- Change the order of your points to strengthen your argument.
- Check that everything is clearly explained and relevant.
- Provide additional supporting evidence/quotations where needed.
- Remove superfluous supporting evidence/quotations.
- Eradicate needless repetition.
- Check grammar (especially punctuation) and spelling.
- Check and adjust length.

7. Producing a Final Draft

This should be a largely mechanical process enabling you to submit a carefully edited and proof-read assignment which answers the question.

8. References

Good academic practice demands that wherever material or arguments (including quotations) are used from a primary or secondary source, a note must be included to enable the reader to trace the evidence and check it personally.

- A **reference** (also known as a foot-note or citation) can take the form of an author-date note inserted in the text directly after the evidence e.g. (Rogers, 1990, pp.188-9)
- Alternatively, a number can be inserted in the text and the author/date note listed at the foot of the relevant page or at the end of the assignment.
- Clearly, you do not need to reference every statement made, and getting the balance right is a matter of practice and experience.
- You may find it useful to look at some books and articles to see how different authors have tackled the exercise.

9. Bibliography

You also need to include a **bibliography** at the end of your assignment. This should be a list of all the books, articles etc which **you have used** in the planning and writing of your assignment and not merely those to which you make direct reference in the text. Ideally the list should be made in alphabetic order of authors' surnames, with titles, places and dates of publication. The Harvard System is commonly used:

a. single work

Eliot, T.S., (1957), *On Poetry and Poets*, London.

b. joint work

Kriedte, P., Medick, H. and Schlumbohm, J., (eds.), (1981), *Industrialisation Before Industrialisation*, Cambridge.

c. a chapter in a book

Adams, S. (1984), 'Eliza Enthroned? The Court and its Politics', in Haigh, C. (ed.) *The Reign of Elizabeth I*, London.

d. journal article

Tarling, D.H., (1975), 'Archaeomagnetism: the dating of archaeological materials by their magnetic properties', *World Archaeology* 7, 185-197.

* Use *italic style* for titles

10. Presentation

For ease of marking, and to enable the tutor to make meaningful and legible comments at the appropriate point on your script, please adopt the following guidelines:

- write your name and the assignment number at the head of the first page
- number each page
- leave a reasonable gap between paragraphs
- use a clear font, such as Arial

Remember to keep a copy of the assignment in case it gets lost.

Acknowledging Sources

In writing assignments you will inevitably need to draw upon material from other writers. Good academic practice demands that wherever material or arguments (including quotations) are taken from a primary or secondary source, a note or reference must be included to identify the source and to enable the reader to check it personally.

If you do not do this you may be accused of plagiarism.

Plagiarism is the direct copying of passages wholesale (or disguised by paraphrase) from books, articles etc or from other students' work. Plagiarism is dishonest and is heavily penalised in all institutions.

Indirect quotation

Here you acknowledge the source of the material but put it in your own words

e.g. Bond (1998) challenges the view that ...

Direct quotation

e.g. Bond (1998) is adamant that '...this is not the best way to tackle world crises.'

If you wish to use a longer passage you need to indent it from your main text

e.g. Bond (1998) argues that:

'The global political, social and economic situation has changed rapidly in recent years. He does not see a secure future for his profession.'

Bibliography on Study Skills

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