



CSU Learning Skills: *your link to success*

Learning skills

How to study effectively

There's no *one* way that will always produce the best results for students. It's more about determination than great intelligence! So success may have more to do with well developed study skills than intellectual ability. This guide suggests ideas for effective studying but it's up to each student to find the methods and strategies that will work best for them.

There are four factors that support an effective study routine:

- showing independence in learning;
- being able to organise yourself;
- being actively engaged in your learning; and
- adopting a 'deep approach' to learning.

Independence in learning

Learning is a student's responsibility; no-one will be forcing you to learn at university. Independence is therefore an important aspect of effective study. When students accept control for their learning, they are recognising that learning is something they do for themselves, not something that is done either to them or for them. Independence doesn't mean you have all the answers or that you will never need to seek the assistance of someone else. It does mean though that you have a willingness to work things out for yourself without waiting for someone to give you the answers. An effective independent study routine means:

- being self-motivated and taking control of your learning
- setting, and then maintaining, your own goals and standards
- identifying your strengths and [learning preferences](#).

Part of being an independent learner is the capacity to think critically and creatively. In a university learning environment, differing points of view are accepted as equal in value. Ideas and theories are open to challenge, so students need to put forward both evidence and rational argument to either sustain or dispute opinions. To think critically, you must be willing to consider and evaluate ideas and theories that are new to you, rather than simply accepting them because they're part of course content. Maintain your intellectual curiosity and the capacity to show independent judgment.

Self-organisation

Plans and goals

Be sure to organise yourself and your study environment in a way that best suits your learning. Perhaps the biggest issue facing university students, particularly in their first year, is the problem of organising themselves to use their time in a structured and planned manner. Without a study plan and some focussed learning goals it will be all too easy to procrastinate, especially if the subject matter is difficult to master or doesn't really interest you. Become actively engaged in your learning by deciding exactly what you want to achieve in each study period.

Distractions

Be ready to manage sensibly the distractions and interruptions that are bound to arise in any busy person's schedule. Reflect beforehand on the things that might disrupt your study program then write down some ways of avoiding or managing these interruptions. For example, let the message bank take phone calls which can be returned later. Keep a blank 'procrastination pad' on the desk. If you start thinking about what to cook for tea, what's on TV, a bill to be paid, the library book that's overdue, how to stop your children fighting, what to buy a friend for their birthday or where to go for your holidays, write a note to remind you to think more about it later, *after* your study period.

A place to study

A dedicated workspace for study is both a physical and psychological necessity. Some students find a tidy study area essential, others can function among apparent chaos. All will benefit from creating a physical space where they can keep study material, notes and textbooks organised. Organise a spot where you can pin up your [timetables, study schedules and planners](#) for easy reference. Reminder notes and 'to do' lists are easily displayed. Aim to have only things you need on your desk, keeping it clear of magazines or bills to pay, which might divert your mind from study.

A regular study area becomes a recognised space that you can withdraw to by habit, a place you immediately feel comfortable in and, therefore, where you settle down quickly to organised and effective study. Your study area should be limited to just this—study. It is not a place for doodling or day-dreaming; planning a trip to the gym or painting your nails. If you devote the workspace solely to study then each session will take you less conscious effort to settle down to some concentrated study.

A time to study

Part of organising yourself and maintaining a positive study environment is to know when and how you study best.

- What part of the day (or night) is your preferred study time? Some of us are 'morning' people and our optimal study time is in the morning and early afternoon. Others find that their most productive – and uninterrupted – study time is in the evening or maybe even late at night.
- Do you like almost complete silence as you study or do you prefer to study with music or the radio playing?
- How long can you study without tiring? It suits some students to study for an hour before having a short break of, say, 15 minutes. You may be able study continuously for two or three hours before taking a long break. Find out what works best for you and plan your study schedule according to your concentration levels.

Training others to respect your workspace and study times is something you need to consciously undertake to create an environment for effective study.

Sometimes students, for a variety of reasons, find it nearly impossible to find or create the ideal study space. Remember: an hour of study under what you may consider as poor conditions is far better than **no** study at all!

Engage actively in your learning

Learning is most effective when an active, rather than a passive, approach to study is adopted. Watching TV, for instance, is a passive process; it requires little or no action on our part. Whatever information we receive is probably soon forgotten. However, effective study requires the learner to take action. It means that the student becomes an active participant in the study process.

Try these to help make your study time engaging are:

- stick to a customary place that includes a desk or table as a workspace (beds and soft chairs are not a good idea as they tend to promote sleep instead of active study)
- take a few minutes to settle and relax before you commence study
- give yourself a short break each hour, with a stretch and a drink of water, to help maintain concentration
- be specific about your study objectives for the session (for example, *Read chapter 5, complete exercises 1-5*; not *study biology*, because the second objective is too broad).

Other active study techniques include

1. *Preview* Before you begin any detailed study, first preview course material, study guides and textbooks in order to gain the big picture.
2. *Browse* Quickly scan through relevant readings or textbook chapters to pick up on themes and main ideas. Use headings, captions, charts and graphics to guide you through unknown learning territory.
3. *Take notes* As you read, make notes in your own words. There is little value in copying the exact words of a text. Learning is not about reading a whole lot of material in the hope that something might sink in. It's about making sense of new ideas and concepts; of internalising them and incorporating them into your existing knowledge. Use [concept maps](#) to provide a visual representation of ideas, concepts and themes and help define relationships between them.
4. *Walk and Talk* Walk around the study area, reciting facts out loud or explaining concepts as if an interested adult was in the room with you. You will have to clarify your understanding in order to 'teach' someone else. Hearing the talk may help you recall details later for assignments and exams.
5. *Highlighting* Use highlighters (sparingly) to emphasise significant points and ideas in a text. Experiment by using two colours; also try using underlining, * asterisks *, ←arrows → and margin notes as further means of text summary.
6. *Ask yourself questions* As you read, engage with the author by questioning the text: *What is the author trying to say? How does this information fit in with what comes before, or after? Asking So what? Why? and What if?* can help you to explore the implications of what is being stated and to make sense of new material. Set yourself a small set of relevant questions before you read a text, then see if you can find the answers as you read.
7. *Re-reading* A good practice is to re-read important material relating to the course, and to review your own notes on a regular basis, either to confirm or to add details.
8. *Discussion* Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. Be prepared to explore key concepts and specialised knowledge relating to the study discipline through discussions with other students, and with lecturers too. Form a study group or find a study buddy:
 - Quiz each other
 - Talk through ideas
 - Quiz each other.
 - Make up questions.
 - Brainstorm on a wall chart or the board in an empty tute room.
 - Create [concept maps](#).
 - Take advantage of synergy. The combined energy of a pair or group is likely to be more than the sum of each individual's efforts.

A deep approach to learning

You are more likely to be effective in your study when you adopt a deep approach to learning. You'll focus not so much on reproducing something for the next assignment task but on maximising your understanding of the whole topic. Using this approach, you're more likely to initiate opportunities to learn rather than wait for directions from course material or a lecturer. Some deep learning strategies are:

- making sense of new knowledge and developing understanding rather than simply learning sets of facts and information to be reproduced when required
- looking for what is significant like key concepts and principles, relationships between ideas, lines of reasoning
- employing higher order thinking skills through examining issues, clarifying problems, producing own ideas, and thinking critically
- asking questions about what you are learning, and discussing ideas with others
- relating new ideas to previous knowledge and experiences
- reflecting upon what's learned and reviewing the effectiveness of your learning strategies
- finding the link between conceptual knowledge and real-world applications
- accepting the challenge that learning involves you in actively constructing knowledge for yourself.

If you're finding it hard to develop an effective study routine you may choose to contact a learning skills adviser. Perhaps the one thing that will make all the difference in achievement is bringing a positive mental attitude to your studies. It definitely pays to be *determined* that, come what may, you *will* succeed!

Common problems students face with study

1. *Why do I find it difficult to settle down to study?*

Do you procrastinate? Recognise that *you* are totally responsible for using your time in the most productive way. Once you own up to the fact that you *are* just putting things off (Be careful! Procrastination can masquerade in a thousand different guises!), then you're in a better position to control your actions. Don't create a barrier by thinking of your study as an obstacle to be overcome but as a challenge to take up. Find practical ways to increase your motivation and then practise them so that the time you spend studying is quality time.

Don't have a dedicated study space? Find it as soon as possible (whether it be at home, somewhere quiet on campus, or even a spot you have negotiated with a friend or relative at their place), and begin to 'own' it as yours for study.

Are you easily distracted? Do you allow interruptions to come between you and your learning? Having a recognised space for your study, and asking family and friends to respect your study times and place, will go a long way towards minimising uninvited distractions. Identify the obstacles that prevent you from successful study with the intention of being better in control. Perhaps you need to:

- close the door;
- turn off the mobile phone;
- prepare a schedule for your study session with beginning and ending times;
- take strategic study breaks so you can still pay bills, go to the gym, pick children up from school and make important phone calls.

2. *What can I do if I am not really interested in a subject?*

Be realistic about yourself and acknowledge that it's okay to have definite interests and dislikes. Most students will find that they have at least one subject they're not keen on but the subject still has to be tackled as part of course content. Hey, you owe it to yourself to do your best despite your negative feelings about the subject. Stay motivated and maintain a positive attitude towards your university studies and the long term goal of graduating.

Tackle the readings and assignments for this subject first in your study schedule, instead of leaving it until last, in the hope that you'll feel more motivated later. Treat the topic seriously, accept the difficulty or the uninteresting nature of the subject matter as a challenge, and reward yourself with some minor 'luxury' for completing a reading or spending a productive an hour on the subject. Keep a running record of your study times and achievements in the subject; and be sure you take the reward *only* when performance matches previously stated goals.

3. *I am doing a lot of reading but I still do not really understand the topic.*

Reading is much more than having a whole lot of words pass before your eyes. Trying to master the topic by doing a lot of reading may be going about things the hard way.

When approaching an unfamiliar text, such as a book chapter or a journal article, scan it first before trying to understand the detail. Take in the headings, briefly read any introduction or conclusion, and check the first sentences of main paragraphs (often the topic sentence), along with any charts and diagrams in the main text to pick up on leading themes. Next, as you read in more detail, digest the things that you can understand. You might choose to highlight, circle or underline key words and concepts or create a [concept/mind map](#). Alternatively, take brief notes without letting yourself get bogged down in the difficult passages of the text. Accept that you may have to return to the text later to confirm or refresh details you didn't at first understand. Tackle the second text in your reading list in an identical fashion. As you work through recommended readings, follow the simple reading/note-taking pattern. You'll find that you do, indeed, gain a better understanding of the topic. Often too much concentrated reading, without any real purpose, can cause information overload; the details don't make any sense to you because you simply haven't developed a big picture view of the subject matter.

The very important aspect of *review* is often neglected by students. A short review of readings, notes, or your assignment task *immediately* after a study period (rather than at some later date) will be tremendously helpful in your grasp of the subject matter and also in retaining information.

Check out the website section on reading for further practical advice and [effective reading techniques](#).

4. *I have trouble concentrating during my study time.*

You need to recognise that study is hard work, and therefore it's important for you to keep up a balanced diet with proper amounts of rest and periods of relaxation to study effectively.

If you find your attention beginning to fade, you may need a break. Get up, stretch or go for a walk around. Take a few slow, deep breaths, and certainly have a drink of water. Then if you can't return to concentrated study, face up to reality and finish that session. Come back later; it's best to study with peak concentration levels.

Study in short time blocks with short breaks in between. This approach keeps your mind from wandering or from feeling fatigued, and will also help reduce time-wasting activities as you try to settle into study. Follow this approach in a planned way, not spasmodically, and maybe with the idea of gradually increasing the length of your study period.

Be as *active* as possible: make notes, create mind maps, talk through key points aloud or explain new concepts as though there is another interested adult in the room with you (quietly if neighbours start looking at you quizzically), walk around the room as you talk, throw a soft ball against the wall as you recite points to remember, make up rhymes or songs to help remember facts or sequences.

References

Cottrell, S. (2008). *The study skills handbook*. (3rd ed.). Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan. See the sample chapter available at:
http://www.palgrave.com/catalogue/catalogue.asp?Title_Id=1403911355

Wallace, A., Schirato, T. & Bright, P. (1999). *Beginning university: Thinking, researching and writing for success*. St Leonards, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Wark, D.M. (2002). *Instant study skills*. Retrieved September 23, 2003, from University of Minnesota, University Counselling & Consulting Services Web site:
http://www.uccs.umn.edu/counseling/self_service/study_general.htm

Additional Web resources

The following websites provide further information and some have been used as a basis for the writing of this guide. You can google other sites by typing an appropriate search term, but try to ensure the sites you use are reliable sites.

Active learning: Learning Skills Unit, University of Melbourne
<http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/lisu/resources/study/estudy008.html>

Control of the study environment: Cook Counselling Centre - Virginia Tech
<http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/control.html>

Effective habits for effective study: University of St. Thomas (UST), St. Paul, Minnesota.
<http://www.rism.ac.th/Hs/resources/studyguides/attmot4.htm>

[Strategies for Improving Concentration and Memory](#), in Study Skills Self-help Information, Division of Student Affairs, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Choose the [Strategies for Improving Concentration and Memory](#) link, and complete the online self-help assessment questionnaires.

What am I supposed to be doing when I'm just 'studying'?

The key to studying is to set up concrete tasks for yourself which are relatively short and well focused. It helps when you can see whether or not you've done specified tasks so you feel you're generally achieving something. UniStudy, The University of Queensland.

<http://www.sss.uq.edu.au/linkto/ugweb/faq04.html>