

SMARTER STUDY SKILLS

**HOW TO
SUCCEED IN
EXAMS &
ASSESSMENTS**

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Asking questions

Although learning is up to you at university, if you do not understand something even after you have attended the relevant lectures, delved into the recommended texts and spoken to others on the course, then go to your department and ask to see someone who can help you. Departmental secretaries are usually good people to speak to first in order to find out about availability of academic staff. Otherwise, email your lecturer to make an appointment or to pose the question directly. Staff like being asked questions and within a few minutes may iron out the difficulty for you. This may also highlight to the staff member that a topic may need to be revisited with the whole class.



Using your 'visual' brain

Generally, most people tend not to exploit their visual memory. If you use highlighters for headings and sticky place tabs on key sheets in your file, then this will help you find things more readily and also help you remember content because of the layout of the page or the positioning of notes within your file ([Ch 12](#)).

● How to study actively

It's all too easy to go through the mechanics of studying by copying out notes or reading a chapter from beginning to end. While this could be *part* of the process, it's important to think about what you're doing and why. Table 5.2 lists some typical activities along with the questions you should be asking yourself as you do them. Being aware of these different aspects of studying will prevent you from working 'on autopilot' and will help you to internalise your reading and writing.



Reading as a sole method of revising

Most authorities agree that simply reading lecture notes or texts themselves is a relatively poor method of absorbing information. Your brain is more likely to retain information if it has had to process it in additional ways, such as paraphrasing in note form ([Ch 11](#)).

Table 5.2 Typical study and revision activities, with questions to ask yourself as you do them (see also tips in [Ch 11](#))

Rewriting notes from lectures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are the key ideas? ● Do I need to reorganise these to create a logical sequence that matches my understanding? ● Is this taking up too much of my time? If so, try to take your original notes more neatly in the first place. If you think that rewriting notes helps you to learn, could you synthesise the notes into bulleted lists/flow charts/diagrams rather than lengthy sentences?
Making notes from texts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How is the information organised? ● How can I identify the key ideas quickly to provide an overview? How can I restructure information into concise notes? ● How much detail do I need for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learning about the topic? - eliciting information for an assignment? - revising for exams? ● What is the best method for framing my notes?
Thinking/reflecting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do I think about this topic? It's important that you don't just take what someone else tells you as the only approach on the topic. Think critically by questioning your own ideas. Be prepared to redefine your view in the light of new approaches, information or evidence. ● What should I be looking for - information or concepts? If information, how reliable is your source and can you cross-check from another resource? If concepts, what evidence is there for each viewpoint? How good is the evidence? What other evidence might be available? Where will you find this? ● Are any patterns emerging? Look for relationships or themes, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - cause and effect (reason and result); - comparisons and similarities, contrasts and differences; - threads of arguments, supporting evidence and counter-arguments; - problem and solution analyses.
Working through problems and examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is the answer sensible and are the units correct? ● Have I done what has been asked? ● Is there anything else asked for? ● Have I used the correct formula? ● Have I used all the information given in an appropriate way?



Practical tips for studying independently

Know your best time to study. You are at your most effective as a student at particular times; exploit this by doing intensive learning activities at these times.

Check out the hours that facilities are open. Find out the library, study centre or computing facility opening times. Plan your study periods around them if you prefer studying in these settings.

Plan ahead. Keep an eye on things you have to do over the following week/month and plan your time to fulfil all the assignments, lab and tutorial work on time.

Develop a personal filing system. Learn to be methodical in the way that you store notes, handouts and any other printed material within your filing system.

Think about the underlying principles involved in your learning. Keep your focus on the bigger picture and avoid becoming bogged down in the minutiae.

Take breaks. When working on your own it is essential to take breaks. It is also important to maintain your social networks, and taking regular short breaks with colleagues helps you to maintain perspective on your work.

Work with a buddy. Although studying is something that you may wish to do primarily on your own, coming together with another person on your course to compare notes, confirm understanding of more difficult points and discuss a set assignment can help the learning of all involved ([Ch 6](#)). This contributes to the consolidation of your learning and helps identify gaps in your knowledge.

Develop your professional vocabulary. For subject-specific and general language, it will help you to remember words if you write them down along with a simple definition. A small, cheap telephone address book marked off with alphabetical sections makes an instant glossary reference notebook. You can record new words/specialist terms easily in alphabetical order, which makes retrieval easier than if you had recorded these indiscriminately in a long list.

Reinforce your learning. You will need to be able to use the language of your subject appropriately and make sure terms are spelled correctly; you need to master key formulae so that they become

second nature to you. This is a reflection on your command of your subject. Make a habit of checking through your glossary or formulae lists frequently so that you can make a conscious effort to learn how to spell the more difficult words or lay out formulae accurately.

Tackle tutorial questions. Do *all* the examples in a set of tutorial questions as part of your revision. Check your answers from the answer key, if provided. If you have difficulty in working out a particular solution, then ask one of your lecturers or tutors to give you some guidance – staff will often go to considerable lengths to help with difficulties. Once you are satisfied that you have the correct answers, file the tutorial sheets alongside the related topic notes.

GO

And now . . .

5.1 Go through your course handbook. Note down all the topic areas that will be covered on your course. Use these topics as headings for the dividers for your files so that you have an allocated space for the notes that will apply to these areas when you receive them or compile them for yourself.

5.2 Visit your subject departments. Find out where the course noticeboard is situated; visit the department electronically by looking at its home pages to find out if there is any special area that provides routinely updated information for students; visit your virtual learning environment and explore any sites that have been set up to support your learning in your subjects. Familiarising yourself with sources of information at an early stage in the course will save you a lot of time later when you may be under greater pressure.

5.3 Review your skills and learning patterns. If you are 'rusty' on word-processing or not quite sure of how to search a resource database such as a library catalogue, then make it a priority to upgrade your skills. You can do this by consulting the appropriate facility or service in your university to access an induction or training course. Consult Table 5.2 and consider whether your approach to study activities is helping you to study as effectively as you might.

How to work with fellow-students to improve the revision experience

Teaming up with others as part of your study and revision effort is recognised as beneficial in many respects. This chapter explores some aspects of this 'study buddy' revision approach.

Key topics

- What is study buddying?
- The advantages of study buddying

Key terms

Extrovert Introvert MBTI Study buddy

Revising for examinations is a positive experience in lots of ways. It heightens your understanding of your subject and allows you to make connections between different elements of the course. It needn't be a solitary activity and many people find that it improves their learning to work on revision with another person studying the same subject, at least for part of the time.

● What is study buddying?

The study buddy concept is based on a mutual arrangement between two or more students studying the same or similar subjects, who agree to support each other in their learning by conducting joint study sessions within their revision timetable (**Ch 8**). Examples of suitable revision activities include:

- meeting together to work through tutorial questions, comparing answers and analysing the correct approach;
- studying a topic as individuals and then meeting at an agreed time to quiz each other on the topic;

- speaking to each other about a specific topic (even giving a 'mini lecture');
- sharing resources, such as missed lecture notes, handouts, website and textbook information;
- sharing advice about modules that one person may have passed but the other(s) not;
- working together on formulating answers to questions on past papers;
- providing psychological support when one of you needs motivating or stimulating to study.

This technique probably suits some personality types better than others (see smart tip below and Table 4.3). You'll need to decide for yourself whether it will be appropriate for you and, crucially, you'll need to find someone else who thinks the same way.

Personality types and learning styles most suited to study buddying



The MBTI divides people into either extrovert or introvert types, but individuals from both types can be suited to study buddy learning strategies. If, having carried out the questionnaire in Tables 4.1-4.3, you identify yourself as one of the following types, then it might be worthwhile trying this approach: ENFJ, ENFP, ENFJ, ESFJ, ESFP, INFJ, INFP, ISFP, ISTJ.

● The advantages of study buddying

The study buddy approach works very much on the principle that two or more heads are better than one and that the process of working together to tackle problems, key issues or difficult areas can assist all those involved to learn more effectively.

- You can help others with topics where you are stronger; and you can receive help from others to strengthen your weaker areas.
- Explaining your understanding to someone else can help to clarify the issues, process or technique in your own mind. It can also help the other party, who may learn better when things are explained by a peer, because the language is less formal. They may also feel