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INTRODUCTION:

What Are Study Skills?

Study Skills are strategies and techniques that enable you to make the most efficient use of your time, resources, and academic potential. Developing and improving your study skills can help you:

- To make more efficient use of your study time - get more work done in less time!
- To make your learning easier, and help retain what you have learned for longer.
- To feel the work and effort involved is worthwhile; it 'pays dividends'.

Who Can Benefit from Study Skills?

Anyone who is engaged in learning can benefit from developing his or her study skills. Regardless of whether you are preparing for college, or have already started on a course of study, you can always improve your ability to learn, retain, and retrieve information. The aim of this module is to help you develop better study strategies, so that you can increase your chances of being successful in whatever you choose to study, at whatever level.

Does this Mean that All People Learn the Same Way?

There is no one “best” way to learn. It is increasingly recognised that people learn in different ways. Some people learn best by doing; others prefer to learn by listening or reading. Some learn best in group situations, others learn best alone. The secret is to find the methods and techniques that work for you, and to maximise on these.

The techniques and methods suggested are deliberately chosen to cover a wide variety of learning styles and preferences; by all means adapt them to suit your preferred way: that is real learning! You can build on techniques that support and improve your preferred styles by experimenting and adapting with techniques from the various sections in this module.

Remember that, whatever stage of learning you are at, it is always useful to practise learning in a variety of ways, experimenting with different styles of learning. The more versatile your learning repertoire is, the better you will do all round.

How to use this Module

The module is broadly divided into four parts, although there is of necessity some overlap:

1. Motivation, Goal Setting, And Time Management
2. Organising your resources, your environment, and yourself for Effective Study.
3. Improving your Reading and Note-Making Ability
4. Preparing for Examinations.

There is nothing new or unique in this module, it is simply a collection of practical suggestions and techniques that has worked for many of the students I have been privileged to work with over the years, and from whom I learned so much.

There is also no set way to approach the sections. You might like to begin at the beginning, and work through them in a systematic manner. Or you may like to 'dip in' here and there as you feel you need to. Another option is to use the table of contents to find the topic or area closest to your enquiry.

I have tried to present it in an easy-to-read, straightforward manner. Use the methods and techniques that work for you; discard the rest. The result will be that your learning is more efficient and more enjoyable, which is the true test of any worthwhile activity!

Enjoy your learning!

Rita O'Donoghue
CHAPTER 1:
Motivation, Goal Setting And Time Management:

Your Motivation for Returning to Learning

Learning Objectives:
To state the goals you want to achieve by undertaking this particular course.

What are your reasons and motivations for returning to learning?
Whatever your reasons, this course is clearly a return to learning for you. You have decided that this course will in some way further the aims and goals you have set for yourself. You are therefore more than likely already very committed to doing the course, and are aware (at least in general terms) of the time, energy and effort you will need to put into it if you are to achieve your goals.

It is important to understand how you can turn your wish to achieve into real results. Perhaps even more importantly, you need to know how you can sustain your efforts, even during those times when you would much rather be doing something else.

Your goals will be the driving force that will transform your intentions or motivations into the actions and behaviours that achieve these goals.

Following any course of study is not always going to be easy. In fact, there may well be times when you wonder what possessed you to start in the first place - and you may even feel like walking away from it all. Every student at some stage feels like this. If you have in place good coping mechanisms and study behaviours, they will see you through the rough times until your enthusiasm returns.

This Study Skills guide aims to make it easier for you to succeed in completing the course, and to make the learning more enjoyable for you. It introduces you to a range of tips and methods that will enable you:

- To make better use of your time
- To develop skills relevant to your course of study
- To develop techniques and strategies that improve your ability to learn.

And to develop learning techniques and strategies that will help you:

- Source and select information and ideas relevant to your study questions.
- Apply what you have learned in a variety of ways and contexts.
- Critically evaluate information, including examining different and often contradictory points of view.
- Critically evaluate sources in light of all the information you have, to make a balanced or informed judgement/argument.

Strong motivation is the first most important step on the road to success. By actively developing good study skills and learning strategies you will keep your motivation high and achieve your goals much more easily and more efficiently.
Goal Setting for Success

Learning Objectives:

See the links between positive thinking and success. Develop and keep up a positive attitude by following a task or goal reward achievement system, Distinguish between long term, medium term, and short-term goals, and apply these in a practical way.

Achieve Your Goals: Links between Positive Thinking & Success

Get an Attitude! Success is not just about hard work - it is also about your attitude to your studies and your belief in your ability to succeed.

Of course, there is effort involved, but the effort is not quite as difficult when you believe you can achieve your goals. Believing in yourself is the first step in maintaining your commitment and effort. Thinking positively increases your confidence, makes studying easier, and increase your chances of success. Believe in yourself, and your ability to achieve your goals. No-one is forcing you to work. You are working to achieve your goals. Develop and sustain a positive attitude.

The “Fight or Flight” Syndrome

Your attitude and approach very often determine how you deal with problems and difficulties. It matters, for example, whether you look at setbacks and obstacles as problems or challenges. Of course there will always be genuine setbacks and problems and indeed, crises in life, but, in the general run of events, your ways of coping (your coping mechanisms) will either strengthen your resolve to achieve your goals (the “fight” syndrome), or set off your “flight” tendencies (the “flight” syndrome).

- Avoidance tendencies can be very strongly developed behaviours, and can ruin your attempts to make a go of your studies.

To combat this type of avoidant behaviour, develop a realistic sense of what really needs to be done (for example writing a paper) against what you suddenly imagine needs to be done (for example tidying the attic) when a deadline is pressing.

- If you allow them to arise, there will always be very acceptable reasons for you not to study. Nip these destructive, time-wasting habits in the bud.

If you follow this advice, you will be able to see your progress for yourself, and this will increase your belief in yourself and in your ability. Build on what you enjoy. Use rewards for working, particularly on subjects you find difficult or which do not appeal to you.

Reward yourself when you attain your goals. Rewards provide you with regular and powerful reminders that you are being successful. When you reward your successes, they multiply.

Success brings more success!
Set Yourself Up: The Goal Reward Achievement System (GRA)

The GRA system is based on the principles of classical and operant conditioning, research conducted by Watson, Skinner and other behavioural psychologists. It holds that behaviour that is rewarded tends to be repeated and, over time, becomes rewarding in itself - and so is more likely to be repeated.

When behaviour is followed by a reward, the behaviour (in this case, studying) is reinforced and so is more likely to be repeated.

This principle can be used very successfully to keep you “on track” and your learning focused. The principle is that you reward your successes, for example when you complete an assignment, or essay, and so on. The reward itself does not always have to be big. It can be as simple as having a mini-break, getting to watch a half-hour programme, or going to the cinema. What is important is that it is something you want or enjoy, and that it is linked with the task you just completed. As you succeed on small tasks, you begin to enjoy the feeling of having achieved something. In effect, you train your brain!

A Cautionary Tale or Two

Be aware that if the goals you have set yourself are too difficult (for example, “learn everything now”) you may become disheartened and feel overwhelmed. If they are too easy, you will do very little, and fool yourself that you are working. If your goal is too far into the future you may become demotivated, or you will feel you can leave it all until tomorrow.

The trick is to keep your goals realistic, challenging but within reach. Set yourself specific tasks so that you are doing something, not vaguely “reading widely”. Time yourself in order that you accomplish the task within a set time. You will be able to see what you have achieved; this will give you a sense of achievement and the impetus to keep on with another aspect of the task.

- Set yourself goals that are attainable, that encourage you to keep on studying, and that carry rewards upon successful completion.

Beware however: if you still get to watch your favourite television programme even though you haven’t done the work you set yourself, you’re only fooling yourself.

Remember, you have to consciously develop behaviours that match your good intentions, and that enable you to achieve your goals. And you have to actively avoid giving in to, or continuing with, actions and behaviours that block your progress. The rule is No WORK: No REWARD.
Setting Goals: An Overview

Your long-term goals To identify these long-term goals, you need to look forward a year, perhaps three years, or even longer. Your ambition is to achieve a degree, and this is your specific goal.

Medium-term goals Once you are clear about what and why you want to achieve, you can then set about taking the steps towards achieving it. Here you need to look partly into the future, perhaps to halfway through the course, perhaps to plan for the first semester, or maybe even to plan one month at a time!

Your next step is to develop routines and good study habits that help you to achieve your goals as well as fulfill your everyday commitments at work and at home. This is the basis of good time management - to find ways to support your efforts to keep on top of all your regular commitments, and yet still allow for this new exciting venture into learning. To this end, you need to be able to get an overview of what is ahead of you, and devise schedules or routines that enable you to get there. This will also enable you to monitor your progress and to keep your momentum going.

Remember “Success Breeds Success”, so aim to achieve success step by step.

To enable both long-term and medium-term goals, a timeline or year planner is useful and of great practical value in that you have a visual reminder of deadlines and important dates throughout the course/first semester.

Short-term goals Once you have an overall picture of the year ahead, you can make a day-to-day timetable which keeps you on track, but which is also flexible. See it as a means of using time more efficiently rather than as an imposition; attitude and perspective is all-important.
One way to do this is to firstly make out an inventory or list of everything you feel you have to do on a daily/weekly basis. List all the different jobs/roles you fulfil, and the tasks/time involved in each one.

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Your “everything” inventory.
Now take that list and study it carefully. Prioritise the items on the list, discard those you can, and make space (mental and physical) for all the important and urgent activities, including studying, that you really have to do throughout each day/week.

Next step: Make Your New List - Prioritised
When you have worked out what you really have to do, the next stage is to fit everything into a workable daily/weekly routine or schedule that over time and with practice, becomes habit. By developing good study and organisational habits you will find that you use time more efficiently, and achieve much more in less time.
Using Your Time Well

Learning Objectives:
Create sensible day, week and year planner timetables to help you to schedule your study, and still meet your other work and social commitments.

Guidelines for Organising Your Time Efficiently
When organising your time, perhaps some of the following tips will help you. Remember, there are 7 days (168 hours) in a week. Essentials like sleep, work, exercise, free time, quality time with others, family and domestic commitments, travel, and household chores all have to be allocated times slots in your calendar. You cannot leave the ordinary world and devote yourself entirely to studying, however appealing this prospect might seem as yet more and more dust settles. There are times when you should perhaps put studying on hold, for the very simple reason that it might be counter-productive to try and do all things at all times. For example, do not study if you are tired; instead peel the spuds or polish the car.

Work with your time constraints rather than against them.

Use whatever time is available
For example, be happy to block in hour/half-hour study slots on your timetable, rather than feeling that you always have to set aside at least two -three hours at a time to get any study done. The approach suggested here will help you to develop the habit of regular, frequent short study sessions, and is probably more realistic and more time-effective than waiting forever for that elusive “three hours/whole day” (which never happens).

Practise “clumping” like with like
Make all your phone calls together/pay all bills in the one journey/ do the shopping/ironing/cooking at particular times. (One student only cooked twice weekly: 3 meals each time, which he froze, and used in rotation. In time his family grew to like the regularity of at least having a dinner on the table, and forgot to quibble about the limited menu.)

Pass on your chores around the house
Alternatively, persuade your offspring/partner/loved ones to become independent, caring people who take their turn with chores. Anyone, male or female, can change a plug, wash clothes, cook a meal, run kids to class, or do the weekly shopping. It does not have to be you! In a way, your decision to study involves a real adjustment for everyone in the house, not just you. Those you live with will need to be prepared to adjust to the new routines in your life, and the new demands on your time. You may be able to achieve this state of affairs by negotiating upfront. But if you have been in the habit of doing everything for everybody, you may find that the people around you are slow to adjust, and you need to “train them in” a little. Be heartless about it. You really need that time.

For example: Wash clothes on washday, not on demand. Better still; don’t wash them at all if you can avoid it. One student ruined her teenagers’ clothes once too often, and was banned absolutely from ever again washing their clothes. (With practice, this will also work with badly ironed clothes too).

Write into your timetable exactly what you plan to do or are committed to doing at different times.
For example a student, whose job involved a lot of travelling, carried tapes of what she needed to learn, and played them as she drove along. This works great for learning a language, and you can tape lectures too. There are taped versions of books available, or you can make your own.

**Visualise yourself succeeding.**
Imagine yourself wearing a mortarboard and gown, whatever. Top athletes and performers practise visualisation techniques of being successful to sustain their motivation. Borrow their ideas. Believe in them. There will be tough times. Learn to “roll with the punches”!

**Distinguish between urgent and important tasks.**
Refuse to live your life in “crisis management” mode. If you only deal with urgent tasks, your life will be one lurch from crisis to crisis. This is reactive living, and leaves you with little sense of control. Pre-empt crises. Avoid them. Avert them. Stock up on food/treats/brownie points etc. Then, when times really get bad, you will be able to allocate time for a real crisis.

Do not expect to remember everything. Manage your time better.

- **Do not waste time. Use it.**
- Once you have decided what you will do, do it.
- Finish what you start. Time will expand and contract according to your needs.
- Time yourself. Get the task done within your set limits.
- Break tasks into smaller, manageable parts or segments, if you are struggling.
- Tidy up at the end of every study session. Do not leave your physical workspace in a “state of chassis”.
- Make a summary of what you have achieved, where you are now, and outline where you next need to go. Move on.
Look to Your Future: The Year Planner

You need an overview of everything you have to do over the course of the whole year. Write down the “have to do’s” which are not in the weekly routine, but come up every now and again: doctor’s appointments, teacher-parent meetings, dentists, promises to spirit friends/offspring/ to Cinderella’s ball, and all such trivia that make up life’s adventure. In addition, fill in all the study-related details that you have to complete for your course.

Use a year planner to give you an overview of the year ahead. It should clearly show all deadlines.

This will give you focus and determination at different points along the way.

Sample Year Planner Layout to make your own Year Planner.

This is a very direct and simple way of giving you a visual overview of what lies ahead of you for the year. Whilst your long-term aim may be to obtain a degree, just for now, you need only be concerned with how you will get through this first stage/year.

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Use the year planner to chart your “journey,” allowing for the usual (and the unusual) “pit stops.” For example, be realistic about allocating “time out” for Christmas and other events. You are going to take that time anyway, so there is no point in pretending otherwise. Don’t try to fool yourself. (You can use the course’s on-line resource available at [http://etrain2.nuigalway.ie/mature_students_education](http://etrain2.nuigalway.ie/mature_students_education) to access the community calendar and see a more detailed example.)

As soon as you know your course requirements, write them in. Include all possible deadlines: math problems to hand in, worksheets to complete, lab sessions to attend, essays, assignments, presentations, examinations and so forth. Organise your time round these deadlines. (For example, if
you have a math assignment/project/essay due in by a certain date, first insert the “in-by” date, and then work backwards, allowing for each stage of the assignment.)

Block out times when you know you will not be able to study. These include important dates, such as birthdays, celebrations, and weddings, in addition to Christmas, as well the more mundane aspects of life, such as work, dental appointments and other such interruptions to the usual routine.

Be clear about giving yourself time off, and do not feel guilt-ridden. The time is rightfully yours. You need time off to relax and recoup your energies. Allow yourself this free time, but perhaps use it as a reward for work well done and goals achieved. This will double your fun and enjoyment.

Mark in definite times when you will study (eg before exams) on this year planner. This is important, if only to forewarn your loved ones that you are not available at certain times. Mean It!

If you have children of school-going age, block in school breaks: mid-terms, pre and post Christmas, Easter, Bank Holidays, in-service days, and so on. You will be surprised at how little you actually get done during these school breaks. Enjoy special days and celebrations, but again, arrange to put in extra study sessions ahead of time (not afterwards - life happens) and so feel extra good about taking time out to celebrate these important dates and events.

The year planner will help you to pace yourself and spur you on to work hard in the first term. It will also show your progress. This will give you a sense of achievement and keep your determination and motivation high.

Write up your long-term goal. Put it where you see it often, and especially in your study area.
Look to Today: Timetable

As well as your weekly planner, making a weekly/daily timetable will help you organise your day-to-day tasks, which keeps you positive and focused on your studying, and which helps you achieve your targets.

Use the sample timetable template provided in this section to make a practical weekly timetable. Pin one copy on the wall of your study space and sellotape one inside the front cover of your folders/notebooks. To make a realistic but workable timetable, use the following tips:

1. **Keep the layout simple.** Make several blank copies so you can alter it weekly or as you need to. Your first effort might be over-ambitious, but you learn from your attempts what actually works. So every subsequent timetable should be more to the point, and help you achieve more.

2. **Keep it realistic but flexible.** There will be times when you will not be able to study as you planned. Be able to fit in some extra study sessions if you have to.

3. **Divide your time into: “Have to” and “want to”.** You “have to” do certain things; when they’re done, you are free to do the things you “want to.” Balance is the key.

4. **Assess how you use your time.** There are 7 days or 168 hours in a week. Average out the time you spend doing different things. Be ruthlessly honest with yourself. You might find you waste a lot of time (see sample diagram).

5. **Assess how much time you need for sleep & rest.** You do need to take care of your mind, body and emotions. Different people have different sleep requirements, for example. Aim for 7-10 hours sleep every night. Aim to be neither a sleeping beauty nor a raving insomniac.

6. **Exercise regularly:** This is essential! It is not a luxury! Make sure you have adequate exercise without making it your sole purpose in life. The body and mind are inter-connected. Exercise clears the “academic fog”, keeps you fit, helps you relax, and increases your ability to focus and concentrate. Be warned, when times get tough, students often cut out their exercise time. This is a mistake. You will begin to get fat and flabby, lose your self-image, and with it your motivation.

7. **Food:** Try to eat a balanced diet. Don’t try to save time by reaching for the “convenience food”. A diet of pizzas, burgers, crisps, coke and chips will increase your chances of getting bilious and developing a health problem. Try to vary your diet: good food will feed the brain; junk food will trash it!

8. **Keep track.** Work out how many hours you need to spend on your study on a daily or weekly basis. Tick off work as you complete it. Stay ahead of your deadlines. This will give you a real sense of doing well.

A good timetable allows you to organise your time better, so you fit in more quality study time, more quality free time.
### Sample Daily/ Weekly Timetable

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Start at 8.00 a.m. (or 7.00) and finish at 10 p.m. (or 11.00 p.m.). Don’t make the mistake of staying up all hours, and depriving your brain of much-needed rest.

**Monitor and evaluate your progress at regular intervals**

It is vitally important that you reflect upon, and learn from, your learning experience. For example, if your weekly timetable was of no value whatsoever, examine the reasons why this was so. Were you perhaps over-ambitious? Did you consider all your commitments? Have you just got really lousy organisational habits? Maybe you need to look at your goals again, and remember the saying: *If you keep doing as you always did, you will keep getting what you always got.*

Put your timetable in a prominent position, where it will at least be a visual reminder of what you planned to do to further your goals rather than a guilty reminder of what you “ought” to be doing. The difference in perspective may seem slight, but in fact is crucial. When you plan something, you consciously further your aims. “Ought to” is an external imposition, and can have a negative impact, so rid your vocabulary store of it. Remember you **choose to study** to further your aims, so be **positive** about your studies.
CHAPTER 2
Organising Yourself for Effective Study:

Learning Objectives:
To set up a dedicated study/learning space for yourself and to develop good study routines

To help you get into the habit of studying, it is vital to work out routines and strategies that make studying the norm. One of the most important first steps is to set up a regular place to study, where you have everything “to hand” so that settling down to study is easier. No-one else should touch it, move your stuff or interfere in any way.

Study room/ Workspace: Find a workspace/room that you can always associate with study and coursework. Do it right now. Keep the room airy but warm, and have good light to avoid eyestrain. Avoid using a family space (like the kitchen table) where you have to set up and clear away when others need it, as this will affect your ability and motivation to study.

Shelves & Storage: Have shelves to keep your books in order and clearly visible, where you can easily get them if needed.

Clutter-free Desk: Keep your deskworkspace free of clutter, or you will spend your time tidying up and searching for things instead of actually studying.

Year Planner: Put your year planner up on the wall in front of you so that you can see it at all times. It is a reminder of what you have done, and what still has to be done.

Timetable: Keep your weekly timetable on the wall of your study space also, as well as placing another one in your study notebook or diary to keep you on track and focused.

Study notebook or diary. Keep a written diary of events and deadlines. This keeps you organised and you know what you have to do. Use it to monitor and check on your progress.

Primal Spot: Having a special space for study helps you to concentrate and helps you to develop and maintain good study habits.

Divide your study periods into manageable blocks or units (1 unit = half hour). Start small, especially if you have difficulty concentrating. You can always build up the time you spend studying once you have established the habit, and as your stamina increases.
Study for 25 -30 minutes, then take a break, even for a few minutes, and then continue. This gives the brain a chance to rest and to make sense of or consolidate the learning.

Write in exactly which topic or subject you intend to cover in each time slot, rather than just writing in a vague intention to “study”. After a lecture or tutorial, go over your notes as soon as possible, so that you will remember everything important that was said. Remember the 80/20 rules: you can lose up to 80% of your learning if you don’t review it within 24 hours.

There is really no “best time” to study it depends entirely on the individual. You might be a morning person, or you might come alive later on at night. Work round what you like, and what is practical. Get up an hour earlier in the morning if it works best for you.

If you opt for evening study (or have to study in the evening because it is the only time available) the best approach is to study early in the evening rather than late, because the brain gets sluggish and tired as the night progresses. Tiredness makes learning more difficult, and you retain less information for your time and energy - you are not getting “value for money”. If this is not possible, have a power nap and work later at night - you have to work within your parameters.

How many hours of study depends on your background and current level knowledge and understanding. Never compare yourself to others in this regard. Find what is right for you.

Develop routines to kickstart your studying

Summarise. Write briefly in your own words in 2 -3 sentences what you have learned at the end of every study session. If the chapter or section is very difficult, summarise more often. This also is an excellent technique for helping memory and for later retrieval of information, especially when preparing for examinations.

Go over what you have learned often and regularly. This way, you will remember much more, and you won’t have to revise as much when tests are due. Review within 24 hours, and thereafter regularly, to ensure learning is transferred into your long-term memory (LTM). This will make it easier to retrieve at examination times.

Monitor & evaluate your progress. This is a very important part of any learning. At intervals, you have to take stock and see what you are doing right, and perhaps more importantly, what you could do better. Look at the ways you learn. Are you using every available resource for your different subjects? Can you improve on your learning techniques? Can you adapt effective techniques for subjects or areas you have difficulties in?

With reflection and evaluation, you can keep your learning at high speed without too much effort.

Other commitments: Work your timetable round your other commitments, but make sure you give yourself enough study time for your course. Home, work, loved ones, commitments and leisure pursuits. As you settle into your new routine, your ability to fit all commitments in becomes much more developed.

Include some revision slots during the week. This will keep retention high and give you a real sense of achievement, and you’ll be doing revision and exam preparation all year.

Keep monitoring your progress, and look to improving your lifestyle rather than pushing yourself to the limits and inviting stress on yourself.
Put a note up on your door during your study times.

Photocopy and hang on your door.
Learning Objectives:
To access information and resources that will enhance your learning ability.

You should take stock of all the resources you have available to help you achieve your goals, and then use them carefully for full effect. Here are some of the more obvious, and maybe not so obvious:

1. **Your brain:**
   This is the best resource you have. Develop it: train it well, work it well, treat it well (rest and good food) and you will soon have a brain that is more efficient than you imagined. The more you use it and exercise it, the more powerful it will get, and the better it will work.

2. **Lecture Notes:**
   These may be specially prepared for you by lecturers and course tutors to aid your learning. They are particularly useful as pointers for examination revision as well as for writing essays. If you make your own notes from lectures then ensure you attend the lectures, not borrow someone else’s (second-hand thinking) notes.

3. **Books /Internet/ CD-ROMs/audiotapes/newspapers:**
   These are all sources of information. Use them to increase your knowledge and understanding.

4. **Sample assignments:**
   These are very useful. They give you an idea of the level of quality to aim for in your own work. If you are lucky enough to be given one, use it and learn from it.

5. **Past examination papers:**
   These are crucial. They highlight the kinds of topics and questions that are usually asked in exam questions. The past papers will be very similar to the types of questions you will be set in the exam proper. Be careful if the syllabus changes however, so use them in conjunction with lecturer/ tutor hints and advice, but don’t take too many chances or learn too little - you can get caught out like this!

6. **Marking schemes or marking criteria:**
   It is useful to have an outline of the methods and strategies (criteria) used when your work is being assessed. This way, you know what is expected of you. There are no hidden obstacles or hoops to jump through, and this takes a lot of the anxiety and worry away. Usually your college lecturers and tutors give you a very clear indication of what they expect. Listen.
Learning Personalities and Learning Strategies:

Learning Objectives:
To use a variety of learning methods and styles to improve your learning capabilities

It is useful to **examine your learning preferences**, and to see how you can change your learning methods and styles to improve your learning capabilities.

**Watch too, how others learn**, and as importantly, how they succeed, and what methods they use. Can you train yourself in any of the techniques that make them successful? Efficient learners use a variety of methods at different times to achieve their goals. Use every technique that makes your learning easier for you to understand and remember.

Meantime, here are some examples you might like to try:

- **Use learning techniques that involve a multi-sensory approach** to help make the information easier to understand and remember. Where possible, use a mixture of learning styles and methods that include oral (speech), aural (listening), visual (seeing), and kinaesthetic (doing), techniques to help you take in, understand, and remember information. This will make your learning stand out and will improve your ability to take in information.

- **Try different ways of learning for different subjects.** Not all subjects can be or should be studied the same way. Skim or speed-read to get the general ideas first; you will find it easier to learn and remember the facts that support these ideas. When you can, use diagrams, charts, mind maps, time-lines: anything that helps you understand and retain information more easily.

- **Mix n’ match subjects you don’t like or can’t get down to studying.** Mix those you like / dislike / are neutral about with each other. Good practice is to start with a subject you like, follow with a neutral or a subject you dislike, and then one you like. You can start this in small doses and increase the time you spend on a subject you dislike- it will get easier.

- **Use “made up words”** composed from the first letter in key words to help you remember: **MUD** = **M**emorise + **U**nderstand + **D**o

  - **Use diagrams** to help you remember. Create your own flow charts to help you recall how a process works.

  - **When writing your essay or project**, break it down into stages to make it more manageable. This way, you can concentrate on one aspect rather than be overwhelmed by the whole task.

  - **When you are learning formulae, theorems** or indeed any information, try applying it rather than just trying to memorise it. So work out the solutions, don’t just read over them. Doing something makes it easier to remember and to retain it. It is also excellent exam preparation.

  - **With subjects like Mathematics**, this involves working out examples or working through problems. This is excellent practice, because it involves you applying the theory to an actual situation. Even if you don’t fully understand the problem, look up an example, check with a friend, or ask your tutor for help.
• History and similar topics/ subjects. When presented with facts, dates, events and incidents in History, you might use a time line across the middle of the page, and fit all the information on either side of this line, to show connections, influences, causes and consequences. This visual map of events and dates can make more sense than blocks of writing.

• Studying a play or novel. Watching a performance is an excellent way of getting to grips with the plot, themes and events as they unfold (allow for director bias). A follow-up activity (or an alternative) could be to listen to the play (or important parts) at the same time as you follow the text when you are studying the play, especially when the language is unfamiliar, as in a Shakespeare play.

• Language learning. Listening to tapes/ CDs is a very effective way of learning any language if you cannot use it in everyday speech. You listen, take in, grow used to, and copy, the sounds, vocabulary, intonations and speech patterns of the language.

• Practise active learning. You might feel that although you seem to spend hours listening or reading, yet you still remember little if anything of what you’ve heard or read. Become actively involved in your learning, rather than waiting for it to somehow “happen.” The key is to read/listen carefully and actively while trying to follow a line of reasoning and/ or explanations. You will learn more about active listening in the Applied Writing and Communication module.

• Learning with numbers. Numerical data and information can be presented in different ways: graphs, pie charts, bar charts, tables of numbers and so on. It is in your interest to learn how numbers are being used, and what they are used to represent.

• When you read tables, always scan down columns and across rows initially. Look for patterns of steady rising or falling and for peaks and troughs. Where you see a blip, examine the information more closely to see what might have caused it. Do not draw hasty conclusions when reading tables: cautious exploration of possible causes is the order.

Practice stress management techniques. Whereas a certain level of stress can improve performance, and generate a buzz round your studying, too much stress is unhealthy, and can lead to anxiety, insomnia, eating problems, illness and so on. You have a duty to yourself- and only one life. Value it.

Reward yourself. Have time off as a reward for WORK WELL DONE, NOT FOR WORK NOT DONE
CHAPTER 3:
Reading & Note-taking Techniques

Improving your Reading and Note-taking Techniques

Learning Objectives:

Use techniques to give your reading a specific purpose, and which help you remember and retain the information more easily.

Read for Meaning: Reading Strategies

“Reading” the World Around You
Everywhere you go you are presented with images that require you to make sense of them. You “read” these stimuli, even though you might not be aware of it, or indeed you might not really consider it reading. For example, when you make sense of pictures, advertisements (visual and/or written), directions or traffic signs, you are in effect “reading” their message.

In a more specific sense, however, reading is an active process where you make meaning of written symbols on a page (or computer screen). All readers do this. Even young children (emergent readers) will try to make sense of words they don’t actually know, for example they will read “home” for house because they understand the context.

Reading for Enjoyment or Interest
It is important to be aware that this activity of taking in information, processing it, and making sense of it, is a normal everyday activity of your everyday life.

You read for a variety of reasons: for enjoyment, interest, or information. For instance, you might be an avid reader of fact, fiction, sports magazines, or current affairs, and so on. However, much of the time, you will not bother to retain what you have read. You may have a general if somewhat vague idea of the content, unless of course you found it extremely interesting. This is often the case when you really “get into” a good book, where you are likely to remember it in great detail, as you feel a personal involvement with the characters, events, or ideas put forward.

Reading for Study Purposes
When it comes to following a course of study, however, you will most likely have other concerns about reading. These can include the amount or volume of reading required, and whether you will have enough time to read it all and take it in. Then there may be issues around the level of difficulty of the reading material. This may be with style or syntax, that is, the way it is written. Or indeed it may be with content, the issues under discussion, and the level of difficulty in both understanding and remembering the material. You may also find technical language or “jargon” off-putting and incomprehensible.
Reading, then, is much more than just decoding signs on a page. When you read, you actively try to make sense of what you read, and you remember more easily if you are interested or feel involved in the process. You can build on these natural advantages when you are studying. First of all, the topic is interesting to you because you have chosen to do it, and you will remember more easily when you are interested in the material. Accept that some topics or subjects will have a particular style and get used to reading different styles. Where specialist language is used, have a glossary (a page containing technical terms and their meanings) beside you for reference when necessary. But always, always approach a textbook with a definite purpose.

**Reading that has a specific purpose or intention has a very powerful effect on memory.**

Your brain is already geared towards looking for something and making sense of it. You will see that this is something you can capitalise on when you are reading for a purpose.

**Benefits of Active Reading: Research Findings**

The benefits of this active, information seeking approach to reading can be clearly seen from the results of research that was carried out on efficient (expert) learners. The results showed that they all followed certain patterns in their reading behaviour.

1. They looked for **information** that was directly related to their goals (They had a clear **purpose** before they started reading, and that purpose helped them to **identity** what they were looking for).

2. They **searched** forwards and backwards when looking for a particular piece of **information**, and tried to **guess ahead** about information in the text.

3. They **summarised** important or **central points** often, often by making **notes** or writing in the **margin**.

4. They **re-read** any sentences/parts that they found **difficult** or unclear.

5. They had **questions** already **prepared** so that they were **searching** for **specific** information as opposed to reading blankly, hoping to somehow absorb all the information.

6. They **evaluated** new **information** from the text in light of what they already knew.

7. They **checked** their **progress** and **understanding** in light of what they already knew.

This is a very good template for the apprentice reader, or indeed for any reader who wishes to improve his or her reading capabilities. Practise the techniques suggested above. You will find it very helpful if you have a lot of reading to do, particularly if you have not read much to date, or you are finding the content and style of your reading material somewhat difficult.

**Reminder: You are reading to widen your knowledge on a given topic, to develop your thinking, and to weave new information or ideas into your existing store of knowledge and understanding.**

Reading for a specific purpose or intention has a very powerful effect on memory. Be selective in your reading, as you cannot expect to read everything on a given subject. You remember more easily when you are actively looking for answers to specific questions or topics, and when you are interested in the material. Always use an active approach to your reading.
A Better Way to Read: Techniques for Easier, More Efficient Reading

There are different strategies you can use when reading. Depending on the context, find and use the one that best suits the specific task in hand. This section briefly explains the techniques involved. It is based on the SQ3R system. Basically these are the steps involved:

1. **Skim** read to get an overview of the information and to **alert** your brain.
2. Have **questions** prepared, so that you know what **information** you seek.
3. **Re-read** with increased focus and attention, and make **notes**.
4. **Recall** what you have learned, using **summarising** techniques.
5. **Review** the learned information as soon as you can, but within **24 hours** for increased efficiency.

**Skimming (sometimes called “speed reading”)**
This is where you “surface” read very quickly to get the “gist” of a topic or an overview of the chapter/story/instructions/experiment/other. It is usually a preliminary read, and if you find the information you require, you follow up with close reading for detailed information, where you will most likely make notes.

**Scanning**
Where you are looking for specific answers to information, use the technique of scanning. Because you know exactly what questions you want answered, you speed-read and your eyes scan over the words/pages very quickly until they find what they are looking for. Then, rather like in a radar signal, the brain is alerted and focuses in on the details you require.

**Close Reading**
This is when you have pinpointed what you need. Now you read with increased focus and attention, and it is at this stage that you will most likely make notes. If you are given questions at the end of the passage to guide you through the passage, then use these to find out the answers, otherwise have 2-3 questions prepared for which you need to find answers. Your purpose for reading may be to introduce you to, or increase your knowledge on a given subject or topic.

The key is to know what your purpose is, and to be prepared before you start.

**The SQ3R method in more detail:**
1. **Preview/ Survey/ Overview**
   - This is rather like a trailer for a film or video, but you are the one “scouting” for information. It gives you an **overall sense** of what lies ahead, whether you are looking at a book or a section of a book. **Skim** or speed-read to get a preview of what you will be studying, and how it is **organised**.
   - Pay particular **attention** to the introductions or conclusions, and look at any **headings, diagrams** or **pictures** that accompany the text. **Examine** the text layout, and note where points are **emphasised** or “signposted” for you, for example with phrases like, “to summarise” or “of central /prime importance”. It will give you a general idea “the gist” of the main concerns of the chapter or book and **prepare** your brain for the task ahead.

2. **Question**
   - Always have **questions** ready before you **start**. This **preparedness** is the key to **active learning**. Use the **questions given** at the end of a chapter or section. Or you can **make them up** yourself if you need to, and they can be as simple as:
     - **What do I know about the subject already?** **What is the chapter or section about?**
     - **What are the main points or ideas?** (usually 3 -5)
     - **What evidence is there to support (or oppose) these views?**
     - **Are these facts or opinions?** **Are they justified?** **Up to date?**
3. Read ‘n’ Write

- **Re-read** the chapter. Try to pinpoint a “**topic sentence**” which summarises the most important point in a paragraph or chapter. Even better, make one up yourself. This is the sentence that tells you what the **main point** of the section is.
- **Slow down** if you come to a difficult passage. **Skip** backwards and forwards to see if the point becomes **clearer**, or to check if it is **explained** in more detail later on.
- **Re-read** the material until you are sure you **understand** it.
- **Write down** any information that seems to provide **answers** to your study questions in your **own words**; that is, **summarise** it.
- Note any **difficult** words or **technical** terms: look them up later if you can **follow** what is being said, or if you can’t, look them up now.

4. Recall

- Check your **understanding** of what you have read throughout. Can you **recall** what you have **learned**?
- Go through the **main ideas** you have read so far. Do they make **sense** to you?
- Check your **notes** or **summary sheets** and make sure you have included all **relevant** information. If not, do so at this stage.
- **Summarise again**, in your **own words**, the main points of all you have learned in this session. These will double your **retention** and learning **recall power**.

5. Review

- Go over your notes within **24 hours**, and perhaps a week later, and again **regularly** during the course of the term/year. This might seem excessive, but if you do not review newly learned material within a certain time you can forget up to 80% of what you learned in the first place.
- Remind yourself of the **questions** you wanted answered. This will gear you up for **finding answers**.
- Do your notes give you the **answers**?
- **Check** them to see if you have answered everything, and if your notes are **accurate**. Rechecking information will fill in any **gaps** or blanks in your notes or in your memory.
- Make up a **topic sentence** (or sentences) to summarise your summary. This is a sort of “super shorthand”, (or super text message). You **reduce** all you’ve learned to the smallest possible sentences without distorting the meaning. These “text” sentences become a “**prompt**” or external memory of your learning. They are **useful** both for **assignments** and for **examination** preparation: (brain fodder).

6. Highlighting or Underlining: A Colourful Habit

- It can be very useful to highlight or underline important points in your textbooks, but it is not an alternative to note taking. Also, if you re-read the text, other “new” points stand out, so you underline them, and end up with a section totally underlined, but still no notes! So, if you **underline**, use it only as a **reminder** of where you want to make notes. However, remember not to underline or highlight library books or any borrowed material.
Summarising and Note-Taking Strategies

Learning Objectives:

Recognise that summarising and note making help you to retain any information you have to learn.

Note-taking and summarising techniques underpin all your learning. They are very effective “short cuts” for faster, more effective learning.

**Summarising**

The basic principles of summarising are simple and very effective because they help you to:

- **“Make sense” of the text, that is**, you understand new information better and for much longer because you have had to think critically about the meaning.
- **Condense or reduce information** so that you have the “bones” of the text, while still keeping the original meaning.
- **Focus** as you pick out key facts, information and ideas that are relevant to your questions, the “bones” of the information you seek.
- **Get rid of any information that is not needed** or that is irrelevant to the questions you are asking.
- **Link new information with what you already know**, and so helps you to fit it into your understanding and your existing “store” of knowledge.

**Note-taking**

You should use summarising techniques to make notes. Notes should always be in your own words, short, clear, in logical order and understandable.

They are “mental prompts”, a sort of external memory-jogging technique. The key to good note making is to use as few words as possible.

They are a short-cut to the brain. You will not have to worry about whether you are “taking anything in”, the act of making notes or summarising makes you think.

Notes are excellent preparation for examinations, where timing and quick recall of information is very important. They give you a readymade outline plan for exam questions- easier than trying to memorise the information from a book.

When making notes, bear in mind the following:

- **Leave wide margins, lots of white space and room for added ideas.** You should be able to read the information easily and accurately.
- **Use a double page of your copybook**, one side for diagrams, mind-maps or visual cues, the other for linear written notes.
- **Use also flow-charts, charts, diagrams, spider-grams**, anything that works for you.
- **It is pointless having brilliant notes and never being able to find them when you need them.**
- **Put the date on each set of notes**, and file them in order under headings.
- **Subject, Topic, Date, Other.** You will be able to look them up quickly and revise the knowledge, whether in two weeks’ time, or two days before an examination.

**Transcribing: Bypass of the Mind**

Simply copying chunks from textbooks wastes time and effort. The principle is to make textbook knowledge your own knowledge rather than try and learn off someone else’s version. Copying is more a dictation exercise rather than a learning experience, in effect a “bypass of the mind”. It won’t improve your handwriting, it won’t do much for your thinking or learning either. In fact, it has very little value, other than it is a great excuse to avoid getting down to the real business of learning.

Stick to the “golden rule“: **ALWAYS SUMMARISE IN YOUR OWN WORDS**
CHAPTER 4:
Preparing for Exams:
Start Smart: Revision For Examinations

Learning Objectives:

To plan your approach to your revision as early as possible. To have strategies and techniques that help you achieve your optimum performance.

When should you start revision?

As early as you can in your course is the short answer. This might seem like an impossible suggestion, particularly when you are grappling with new material, trying to assimilate new concepts, and keep the “home fires” from going up in flames, so to speak.

However, once you have settled into a pattern of sorts, then slot even, short, regular revision sessions (5 minutes, even) into your timetable. There are very good reasons for this:

- Regular revision helps keep information fresher in your long-term memory.
- You will be able to retrieve the information you need more easily and when you need it.
- You will be less likely to panic or go blank during an exam, as your confidence level, as well as your store of knowledge, will be greater.
- More importantly, nearer exams you will only have to go over existing knowledge rather than having to try to cram everything in at the last minute.

What strategies or approaches work best?

Use every approach and technique that you can think of, and that works for you. This will make your learning more interesting, more memorable, and so more efficient. These techniques can include:

- Descriptive matter, Diagrams, Graphs;
- Calculations, Summaries, Tables;
- Cue cards;
- Mnemonics;
- Visual/oral/aural prompts, Spider diagrams, Mind maps;

In effect, anything that makes information stand out and be remembered for longer.
Get Ready: Exam Preparation

**Learning Objectives:**

Develop specific revision techniques for exam preparation.

**Strategic Planning:** Approach your revision in an organised systematic way. You will cover more ground, and you will feel you are making progress. You will feel more in control, especially if you are able to tick off topics that you have covered as you work through them. This in turn increases your confidence and encourages you to keep working, and so helps you keep your motivation and effort high.

**Timetable:** As examinations approach and the syllabus is covered, set up a revision timetable, a countdown of sorts to help you stay focused and to keep your motivation and enthusiasm high. You will very likely be given some time to prepare for exams, but often this is already used up for essentials like catching up on coursework, feeding the emaciated cat and so on. Towards the end of any course, effort can slip due to sheer tiredness and lack of energy, or burn out. Yet this is a time when you need to gather your energies and resources, and prepare for the final victory.

**Noise & other distractions:** You may feel background music helps you focus, and maybe it does. There are opposing schools of thought here. Many researchers cite the power of association: if you build up the habit of listening to music or other background noise to concentrate, come exam time you might not do as well without this “prompt”. More recently, Study Skills gurus are saying if music be the muse of learning aids, play on! This is open territory: do what best suits you but treat with caution.

**Syllabus:** Take care to check that you have covered everything on the syllabus before you launch off into revising certain areas and topics.

**Course or Topic Summaries:** Write out a summary for each course or topic (Keep it to A4 size if you can). This is time and effort very well spent, as it will show you the main areas you know, and more importantly, those you need to know, and which you need to work on.

**Past Exam Papers:** Excellent preparation because they give you a template (a working example) of what you can expect. Use them to see the kinds of questions that are likely, how to approach structuring your answers, and how to time yourself when answering questions.

**Course Notes:** Use your course notes to go over main points. Skim texts, always looking to draw information out rather than “stuff it” into your brain. Exams are about retrieving information quickly and efficiently - train yourself in this.

**The “Bare Bones” of examination answers:** Prepare basic or “skeleton” answers. By condensing learning you will be able to access it more easily in a real situation; single words or short phrases can act as prompts and triggers. By practising writing under exam type conditions, even if you only write out the outline of what you would cover, you will get used to writing under pressure.

**Practise the exam format:** Make sure you know, and that you are comfortable with, the layout of the papers. Each subject will have different sections, choices of questions, compulsory questions, and questions that attract different marks. Use these as a guide for the exam structure and outline.

How to get there: PRACTICE, PRACTICE, and PRACTICE. You remember best by doing, not by watching, listening or reading, so do all you can.
Strategic Play: Examination Performance

Learning Objectives:

To harness your stress to achieve optimum performance in the examination. To use your store of knowledge in the best way you can by being well prepared mentally, physically and academically.

It is natural to be afraid of the unknown. Knowing what is ahead of you in an examination takes away much of the fear. Have the exam format well thought out beforehand. Know how to best use time during the exam, how to plan your answers, and how to answer the question you have been asked.

A certain level of stress is healthy. It gears you up for the “big performance.” Ensure you keep your stress levels healthy so they work for you rather than against you on the day.

Arrive at the examination hall a few minutes early. Do not bring a stock of books. You can bring a few notes / flash cards to glance over as a last minute measure.

Have bottled water, but avoid chewy (noisy) sweets, chewing gum and so on.

Avoid coffee or tea before the examination - they act as a diuretic. You don’t want to waste your examination time running to the toilet.

When you are handed your paper, attend to the routine details first. Fill in all the examination paper details correctly. Steady yourself. Breathe quietly and deeply.

Read the paper through carefully first. Read it again.

Read each question thoroughly. Draw a ring around the verbs. Check exactly what you are being asked to do, not what you want to do. Note whether there are several issues to be considered.

Check how many questions you must answer. Mark out the questions you intend to answer. Make sure to answer these.

Allow a set amount of time for each question. If you are asked to answer four questions, but spend most of the time on one, leaving out the others, you cannot get more than 25% of the marks.

If you are asked to do four questions, attempt four. You will be sure to get some marks for any attempt, and every little helps. If you don’t attempt a question, you can get no marks at all for it.

Plan your answer before you start. If points or ideas for your other choice questions come up, you can write them on a separate page.

Do the easiest question first - the one you know best. This will get the “flow” going and give you confidence. But take care to stick to your allotted time for this question - it is very tempting to spend more time than you can afford on a question you know, leaving yourself short of time for other, more difficult questions.

Exams are about what you understand more than what you remember. It is your chance to show just how well you can cope with a stressful situation and still give your best performance. It is not just what you know, but how you use it, that counts on the day.
Once you have completed your first (best) question, it might be useful to plan your other questions. If you are pressed for time later on, you will not have to rush your thinking: your plan will be there for you.

Never panic, even if at first the question seems alien. It will be linked with something you have covered in your coursework. It is your job to find the link. Stress can be a creative, dynamic force, but you need to use it properly. A certain amount of stress leads to a better capacity to take in information, and retain it. More importantly, it sharpens your thinking in an examination situation, where you are under pressure to produce your best. See it as an asset, to be used at the right time. Overdo it, and it becomes debilitating.

Choose your questions and stick to your choice. The reason for this is that your brain will continue to work on other questions while you plan any one. Resist temptation to switch to another question, particularly if you have started one. This is only a panic response. Ignore it and continue.

Check weighting. Spend the time on questions that will bring you higher marks, not on questions that have fewer marks. Managing your time in an exam is crucial to getting you the best advantage.

Pacing and timing in an exam are very important. Speed in an examination is having a very clear idea of how you intend to use your time rather than rushing your thoughts and your writing. Good preparation is the key to excellent performance: have a clear idea of how you will use your time—before you start.

For maths questions, show the starting point and the various stages in any calculation.

Avoid going for what appears to be an easy option. Any creative or personal response needs to be well planned and organised like the more formal type questions.

Display what you know. If you have done extra reading, refer to the author in support of your arguments.

Do not burn out half way through the examination period. Preserve your energies. Keep your best for the examination hall.

Write clearly. You will pick up marks “move easily” if the examiner can actually read your answer.

NO post mortems. This will only fill you with dread or complacency, neither of which is useful.

You have worked hard to deserve it! Reward yourself.

GOOD LUCK!!!
References


Access Programme

Mission Statement
The aim of the Access Programme at NUI, Galway is to create a supportive learning environment where students who have experienced socio-economic or educational disadvantage are equipped and enabled to access and successfully participate in third level education.
Develop routines to kick-start your studying.

Success brings more success!

Organised people are just too lazy to look for things you remember best by doing, not by watching, listening or reading, so do all you can.

Tabhair cuiteamh duit féin. Tabhair scith duit féin mar chuíteamh as an dea-obair seachas as an obair nach dearnadh.

Get an attitude. Success is as much about your attitude as about hard work.

Studying is like a journey: the distance is nothing; it is the first step that is difficult.

Strong motivation is the first most important step on the road to success.

Go n-éirí an t-ádh leat. Tús maith; leath na hoibre.

Murach na h-aistí san atá le scriobh agam, tá mé a cheapadh nach nglanfaí an t-úrlár seo go brách.

Reward yourself for work well done, not for no work done!