

Tips to Improve Your Study Skills

Time organisation

You are much more likely to succeed in your studies if you are well organised. Organising your time is more complex than just writing out a timetable and scheduling time in your diary. What is your usual way of getting things done? Do you work steadily over a long period? Do you work in isolated bursts? Do you have one big flurry of activity when the pressure mounts up? You may need to keep your work style in mind when planning your study time. Your schedule must be practical and realistic. Some students who are not used to having large amounts of time available need to develop good organisational skills. Others who are adding study to an already full life may need to establish new priorities.

Setting Goals

There is always time for whatever you consider to be most important. It is all a matter of priorities. 'I didn't have time for ...' usually means 'I considered other things more important than ...' Spend some time sorting out the priorities in your life. What things are vital, important, desirable, neutral, unnecessary?

It is important to set very specific long and short-term goals.

- Use your Training Plan. Mark target dates on your calendar when assessments are due.
- Each week make a list of things you hope to achieve that week. Rank them in order of importance and tick them off as you do them.
- At the beginning of each study period, set yourself definite goals for that session. Check that you achieve these.

Planning your schedule

You may find it helpful to make a detailed weekly plan of your time.

- Block out your fixed commitments: work, travelling time.
- Mark in those things that are important or necessary for you: sport, recreation, housework, favourite television shows.
- Identify times when study will be number one priority for you and let others (partner, children, friends) know that you are not available at these times. You may choose to allocate particular time-slots to particular subjects or activities, or vary this according to demands.
- Check that you have a balance between study and your other needs, including sleep, exercising and socialising.
- Allow some unscheduled time for emergencies that may occur as deadlines come close.

Using your schedule

- Use time when you concentrate best for the most demanding tasks.
- Use small blocks of time for 'busy' but not deeply intellectual tasks like photocopying or sorting out notes.
- Develop a filing system that organises notes, so that you do not waste vast amounts of time searching through the clutter. You may make use of things like labelling papers clearly, using subject folders or plastic envelopes and colour-coding work.
- Re-assess your schedule from time to time. Do you need to allocate more time to study? Do you need to study at different times?

Finding time

It is essential that you are able to re-organise your life so that study time is available. This may require a big change in your lifestyle, especially if you have a non-student partner. In your planning, work out ways of ensuring that you can make the most of your available time.

- Find a regular study place which can be safely left and returned to, that is, not the kitchen table.
- Ensure that there are as few distractions as possible when you are studying.
- You may choose to count the hours spent on study in a 'good' or 'typical' week, so that you can work out what is realistic for you.
- Allow some free time. You deserve it.

Why bother! ... a loss of momentum

Sometimes students can lose heart during a course. You may need to think about why you are doing the course you are having problems with. What is your goal? What must you do to attain it? Setting your sights on the end result can sometimes help you through the grind.

Late Submissions

If you are having problems meeting deadlines, is it for one of the following reasons?

- You keep giving other things higher priority. It may be useful to spend some time sorting out what things are most important to you and making choices about what you will spend your time on.
- You misjudge how long the task will actually take you. Keep a record of the time spent on each phase of an assessment. Use this as a guide when planning your next one, making allowances for length and difficulty.
- Due dates suddenly appear and take you by surprise. Break down the total task into smaller steps and set yourself realistic deadlines for each step (allowing time for unforeseen events like toothache or surprise visitors).
- You think there is a 'right' answer and you're not sure you've found it. There is no magical 'right' answer. Your reading, thinking and discussing will help you come up with your own individual response to a question.