

HOW TO STUDY 2

Building on what you already know

You need to learn by building on your skills and experience, on the patterns and beliefs which shape your world and language. Even if you only know a little about a new area, having a context in which to understand your new learning helps you remember it more clearly. One of the most powerful tools to help you remember unfamiliar material is linking it to familiar information and concepts.

An example of this is pre-reading, skimming or **previewing** lengthy articles. By reading the chapter outline, skimming the chapter paying special attention to the headings of main sections and subsections, glancing at pictures and illustrations, and reading the summary at the end of the chapter to get an idea of major topics.

Selecting what to learn

It is essential that you consciously select what you want to remember. As a student you are confronted with large amounts of information and there is little point in trying to remember it all. You will need to remember the concepts, theories and ideas developed in your course, and be able to recall sufficient detail to explain them. In exams you may need to write an essay showing you understand the concept or you may need to show that you can apply the concepts in practical situations.

Learning thoroughly

The importance of learning your notes by constantly rereading them cannot be overemphasised. Information and knowledge are the basis you need for subsequent critical evaluation. When going through a textbook or reading a

journal article, you should try to understand it and then **question** what you understand. You should never reject a viewpoint or idea merely because it is new, differs from something you already believe, or lecturers say. In particular, do not reject something because it seems difficult and you cannot understand it. If you encounter this situation, it means you must work harder at it. **Read** it through several times. If it is the textbook that is causing you trouble, try one or two different textbooks to see how they explain the point, as things often seem easier if put in a different way. You might also find a Dictionary of Economics (Sociology or whatever the subject) helpful, as such books summarise ideas in a short space using simple words.

Take in the same information as many ways as possible. Draw diagrams, read about a topic and discuss it. Explain it to somebody else.

A good way of learning is to read something, note (or underline) the major points, then go off and **explain** what the main points are to a friend (the cat will do). An effort to teach something focuses your attention on the subject, really reinforces the information in your memory, and also reveals to you any weak areas of your knowledge. Your small study group (via telephone or computer) is a good outlet for this approach.

Condensing or reducing your notes is a good thing to do: the process reinforces the information and helps to fix it in your head. In addition, the shorter summary version can be read more quickly and learned more easily. Some students find that it helps to reduce the summary down to several key words, in the same order as the

more full notes, and then learn them. Bringing back the list of key words then helps them to recall the fuller notes.

Try to learn something each day

It is not possible to study continually without a break and it is not an efficient use of your time to try to do so.

Your concentration is reduced and you get less out of what you are doing. Try to discover your own optimal time and make use of the information. After the hour's study (or whatever), you should try to do something different say for **ten or twenty minutes**, e.g., have a cup of tea, dig the garden, polish the furniture – it is a good time to do those short domestic tasks that need doing but which seem to get overlooked a lot. Then after this break, you can go back to the studying refreshed.

Many people find that the optimal period for them to study is somewhere between three quarters of an hour and an hour and a half.

If you take a coffee break, try to keep it down to ten minutes or so. **Always remember that you are responsible for using your time in the most productive way.** You get the rewards for doing this successfully, and conversely you get the pain for failure.

It is often useful to set aside a short period every day to read over your recent notes, do some revision of a subject (a different one each day) and draw diagrams or approach your work in a novel way. Perhaps half-an-hour after or before a meal would suit you. Try to find the time that fits your routine the best. Some students find

that reading the textbook in bed last thing at night helps.

It is desirable to develop a study pattern or habit, know your favourite places and how best to arrange your books, note pad etc, around you so that you feel comfortable and at home. Equally you should be prepared to study under conditions that are far from the best for you, learning to close your mind and ears to your environment. An hour's study under what you regard as poor conditions is better than no study at all.

You might consider the question of what time of day you study the best: are you essentially a night person or a day person? Some people work well until late in the evening and even after midnight. Others seem to work better in the day.

If you can quickly relax from tension before you study, you will do better in the long run. There are various relaxation techniques around, and just about all of them seem to work.

Many students find it helpful to look at the end of each chapter of their set textbook, or a different textbook if necessary, where there are often questions for discussion or typical questions about the material of the chapter. They then try to answer them. Even as little as ten minutes each day can be very helpful, thinking about the issue, and jotting down what you can recall or can think of, then checking back with the text itself to see how well you did. Preparing a short skeleton answer is perhaps the best method. You can file these skeletons, after adding to them if needs be, by checking the textbook, along with your notes for that topic. If you are a member of a self-organised study group, you can compare notes and

discuss discrepancies, and this practice will reinforce the learning process.

Getting hold of old exam papers and trying them is a valuable study strategy, especially towards the end of a semester when exams approach (see the Student Association website to order online, note not all subjects are available).

If you have a large chunk of time in which to study, say a morning or an evening, then it is often better to spend it on two or three different study tasks, or study related tasks, in order to give yourself a break. For most people it seems to be more productive to study, say, economics for an hour, switch to psychology for an hour, relax with a non-alcoholic drink for fifteen minutes, and then spend the last three quarters of an hour revising their notes. This is better than trying to devote three straight hours to one subject without a break.

If you have a spare ten or twenty minutes, try to use that time to do one short task, for example, read, review and think about the notes taken yesterday. **Making use of small amounts of spare time is a valuable way of improving performance.** Because the mind is fresh and know that the process will be shortly be over, it seems to take things in quickly and you might find you remember them better.

Mnemonics are methods for remembering information that is otherwise quite difficult to recall. A very simple example of a mnemonic is the '30 days hath September' rhyme. You can utilise mnemonic strategies such as studying in unusual places. For example leaning against the inside of the front door can be used to recall learning. Leaning on the door can

bring back the details of what you where studying at the time. It is using the ten minutes productively that really counts.

If you travel by public transport to and from work this is an excellent time to review notes, plan out an essay or memories definitions. Staring out the window at the same old view will not help your progress.

One important and often missed way of improving your learning is to read carefully the comment on your essays made by the marker.

Learn as you go. Do not wait until just before exams and try to cram. You are a university to learn and use the information, to widen your mind and horizons, to enjoy the intellectual stimulation, to struggle with the new and come to terms with it.

<p>Division of Student Services Help Desk Albury 02 60516828 Bathurst 02 63384678 Wagga Wagga 02 693322405</p>

With out wishing to re-invent the wheel in compiling this brochure, we have drawn on material from Australian universities and other sources for advice and examples. Particular mention must be made of the following:
Bucknal, K.B. (1995) How to succeed as a student, Griffith University:
http://www.gu.edu.au/gwis/stubod/stuadv/stu_advice.htm;
Marshall, Land Rowland, F (1993) A guide to learning independently
Longman Cheshire: Murdoch University.
Nothedge, A (1990) The good study guide.
Open University: Milton Keynes, UK.