



Resources for Online Learners

Getting into Good Study Habits

As an online learner, you will be expected to complete a significant portion of your course work independently. Although faculty assistance will be available, your progress will not be monitored as it would in a traditional learning environment. For this reason, you need to develop a certain degree of self-sufficiency by mastering the skills that will best ensure a successful learning experience.

This tutorial will focus on five key skill areas and offer tips for effectively utilizing each.

General Study Skills
Tips for Effective Reading
Using the Library
Taking Tests



General Study Skills

The following tips are suggested to help you get into the study habit:

1. *Study where the action isn't.* Independent study can often be a lonely business. Sometimes it takes a lot of willpower to shut out the rest of the world. But you must be able to do in order to create an atmosphere that allows you to concentrate. Unless you can discipline yourself to push aside the countless distractions that can interfere with your concentration, the best study habits will be useless.
2. *Plan to Reward Yourself.* Most people will concentrate better and study harder if they have some immediate reward to look forward to. Give yourself something pleasant to do after you have done some productive homework--not before.
3. *Shift quickly into study gear.* Once you have arrived at your place of study, and have all of your study materials ready, say to yourself, "Whatever I need to learn during this time, I'm going to learn--and fast!" In other words, shift into the right mindset and get ready to concentrate before you start studying. Studying with a half-hearted attitude will only waste precious time and effort.

Once your mind is geared up for studying, keep it there. Be careful not to read so fast that you miss the meaning of the material. Watch out for distractions and daydreaming. If your mind starts to wander, try one of the following:

- Take a short walk and get some air
- Do some quick exercises
- Sit in a different place or position
- Get something to eat or drink

Whatever strategy you choose, get back into study mode quickly before your forward momentum is broken.

4. *Know Your Study Limitations.* When studying for a prolonged period, you will eventually reach a point of diminishing returns. Your eyes will tire. Your body may become tense. Your mind will begin to wander.
5. *Don't force yourself to study too far beyond your natural study limits.* Two short but intense periods of study will be more productive than one long period. Consider studying at different times of the day to break up your study periods. Pace yourself!



Tips for Effective Reading

Opening an unfamiliar textbook can be as intimidating as opening a car hood for the first time--unfamiliar words, diagrams, and formulas with no apparent connection, function, or meaning. The key to mastery is in dividing the task of understanding into a series of manageable subtasks.

The first step is to *diagnose* the text. The second is to *actively approach* it. To be an effective reader:

1. *Lead, don't follow.* Try to anticipate the purpose and contents of the book. Read the introduction, foreword, preface, and author's orientation. Review the Table of Contents to see how the information is organized.
2. *Diagnose the organization of each chapter.* Read the introduction and summary to see how the main ideas are related. Scan the chapter to build your curiosity about the contents.
3. *Find the ideas.* As an active reader, you must distinguish among the many ideas presented to you. As you read, ask yourself, what kind of information is being presented--main concept, supporting idea, etc.
4. *Watch for the author's signals.* Key phrases such as "There are three reasons why...", or "Most importantly...", or "Remember that..." usually indicate main points. Phrases like "For example,..." or "Similarly..." signal supportive material.
5. *Read actively, not passively.* Ask yourself questions about what you are reading. Formulate questions by changing main headings into questions. Then try to answer the questions as you read.
6. *Make notes, don't just take them.* Effective notetaking requires a high degree of concentration, however, you must translate the information into your own words for this strategy to be effective.
7. *Recite the main ideas and supporting information.* Reflect on the material you have just read. Take it apart in your mind. Try to comprehend the overall message. What application does the information have? What new questions have been raised?
8. *Review what you have read.* You can increase your retention by reading your written questions, reciting the answers, and reviewing them one week later.



Using the Library

Although electronic on-ramps to the information superhighway are expanding rapidly, the library remains an indispensable tool for the distance learner. If you haven't used a library in a while, it's time to get reacquainted. Learning to use a library effectively can pay big dividends later in terms of saving study time and improving the quality of your work.

Many colleges and universities offer access to local residents outside of the academic community. Your local public library may even have many of the resources you will need. As you survey the options available, consider the following questions:

1. *Library hours.* When is the library open? What about Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays? Are the hours restricted during the Summer or during other school breaks?
2. *Membership Fees.* Is there a fee for community access? If there is more than one option, which option provides the services you will need? What kinds of ID are required to apply for access, and how long will it take to process your application?
3. *Check-out privileges.* What kinds of resources are you allowed to check out? Is there a limit to the number of items you can check out at one time? Can you reserve books?
4. *Orientation program.* Does your library offer tours or some other kind of orientation program? (If available, take advantage of this option as soon as possible.)
5. *Services available.* Is there a copy center or copy machines, and if so, what is the cost of photocopying? Does the library have an electronic card catalog, and is it accessible by off-site computer? Does the library offer search services, and if so, what are the costs? Does the library have an interlibrary loan program, and can you use it?
6. *Resources available.* What kinds and how many of the following resources does the library have in its holdings?
 - Reference materials
 - Books
 - Periodicals
 - Government publications
 - Microfilm/microfiche
 - Electronic databases
 - Audiovisual media
 - Community information

If you have time, practice using the library by trying to research a topic related to your course of study or a topic of personal interest. Getting some experience at this point will save you valuable time when the demands of the course begin to intensify.

Remember, if you don't know how to use the library and its resources, *don't be afraid to ask your librarian for help.* That's what they're there for, and most are very willing to help.

Taking Tests

Contrary to popular opinion, tests are actually a good thing. In addition to giving the instructor a way of evaluating student learning, tests provide:

- a motivation for studying in the form of a concrete goal.
- an opportunity to assemble, sort, and apply relevant concepts and themes.
- a way for you to check whether you learned and can recall the material you've studied.
- a means of providing feedback on your progress.

Successful test-taking requires three things:

- Adequate preparation
- Test-taking skills
- Stress management

Each of these requirements is discussed below.

1. *Preparing for tests.* The following suggestions will help you prepare for any kind of test:

- Read, review and study material as it is assigned. Don't cram.
- Review seminar notes as soon as possible.
- Find out in advance as much as you can about the test (what kinds of questions, what topics covered, what sources of info.)
- Find out if old copies of the test are available.
- Study with other students--if they are as serious as you are.
- Study the material you are least confident about first.
- For essay tests, write out the answers to the questions while timing yourself.

If specifics on the exam are unavailable, the following strategies maybe useful when reviewing for exams:

- Make a detailed list of every topic you need to know, and number them in order of importance.
- Combine your reading and lecture notes and reorganize them according to these topics.
- Choose four or five of the highest priority topics and study them in depth.
- Make up your own questions and answer them..
- Create study "flash" cards to quiz yourself on key concepts.

2. Test-taking skills. Ask yourself whether you do the following before and during a test:

- If possible, look over the entire test to get an overview.
- Read all instructions carefully.
- Answer the questions you know best first.
- Skip any questions you don't know, and come back to them later.
- Review your answers. Use all the available time to your advantage.

3. *Stress Management.* Test anxiety may manifest itself as lack of concentration, butterflies in the stomach or tenseness. If you suffer from any of these symptoms before taking an exam, try the following deep-breathing exercises:

- Find a location where you can be free of distractions for at least 20 minutes.
- Assume a comfortable position and let your eyes close.
- Take 3 or 4 deep breaths, breathing normally for 30 seconds between each breath. As you slowly inhale, feel the tension and pressure in your chest. As you exhale, say the word "relax " silently to yourself.
- Now breathe easily and naturally, silently saying the word "relax " as you exhale. Focus on your breathing and allow it to happen naturally. Do this for 5 minutes.

- As you breathe, tense, then slowly relax, the muscles of your body. Start with your toes and work your way up. Allow one minute of relaxation between each muscle group.
- Appreciate the quiet feelings of relaxation for 5 more minutes.

Additional Resources

Armstrong, W. H. (1998). *Study is hard work : The most accessible and lucid text available on acquiring and keeping study skills through a lifetime, 2nd ed.* Boston: David R. Godine.

Semones, J. K. (1991). *Effective study skills : A step-by-step system for achieving student success.* Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Robinson, A. (1993). *What smart students know : Maximum grades, optimum learning, minimum time.* New York: Crown.

Evans, E. (1998). *The art of academic finesse : How ordinary students achieve extraordinary grades.* Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press.

Coman, M. J. & Heavers, K. L. (1997). *How to improve your study skills, (2nd ed).* Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing.

Vitale, B. A. & Nugent, P. M. (2000). *Test success : Test-taking techniques for the healthcare student (3rd ed.).* Philadelphia: F. A. Davis.

Van Blerkom, D. L. (2000). *College study skills : Becoming a strategic learner (3rd ed).* Stamford, CT: Wadsworth.

[Improve Your Studying Skills \(http://www.unc.edu/depts/unc_caps/TenTraps.html\)](http://www.unc.edu/depts/unc_caps/TenTraps.html)

[Study Skills Self Help Information \(http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/stdyhlp.html\)](http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/stdyhlp.html)

[Effective Study \(http://www.gcsu.edu/student_affairs/study_skills/stskills.html\)](http://www.gcsu.edu/student_affairs/study_skills/stskills.html)

[Study Skill Guide \(http://www.csbsju.edu/academicadvising/helplist.html\)](http://www.csbsju.edu/academicadvising/helplist.html)

[Tips to Improve Academic Skills \(http://www.gmu.edu/student/counseling/sktips/\)](http://www.gmu.edu/student/counseling/sktips/)

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