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# Introducing *The Study Skills Handbook*

## Is this book for you?

This book has been designed to help students to achieve the very best that they can, given their individual circumstances, goals and ambitions.

Whether you already excel as a student or feel you are just starting out, it is highly likely that there are approaches, strategies, techniques and ways of thinking or being that could make your study experience more fruitful, effective, efficient and enjoyable.

This *Study Skills Handbook* developed out of practical work with hundreds of staff and students over many years. It has now been used by millions of students and thousands of lecturers worldwide. Students at all levels from school-leaver to PhD have used *The Study Skills Handbook* to fine-tune their skills, understand more about their learning and build their study confidence. I hope that you, too, will find material that is of value to you.

Study skills evolve and mature through understanding, practice, reflection, trial and error, and feedback from others as you move through the different stages of your course. You may be surprised at how your thinking and language skills develop simply through continued study. However, a good study strategy can start you off on a good footing, help you cut corners and accelerate the learning process.

## Quick tips or deeper learning?

A reflective, active, self-evaluating approach to learning develops deeper understanding in the long term. However, quick tips can be invaluable, too, especially in study emergencies. This *Study Skills Handbook* offers both approaches. Move flexibly between the two approaches to meet your immediate needs and improve in your academic studies for the long term.

## Aims of *The Study Skills Handbook*

The key aim of *The Study Skills Handbook* is to help you to manage your own success as a student. It does this by:

- ★ **Promoting understanding** of how good marks and successful outcomes are possibilities for any student
- ★ **Clarifying expectations** of conventions, study tasks and ways of thinking typical of Higher Education
- ★ **Supporting you** in identifying your strengths as well as what else you can do to achieve well
- ★ **Developing effective strategies** – study habits, techniques and thinking that optimise learning
- ★ **Encouraging a personal approach** – one that works best for you
- ★ **Providing step-by-step guidance** in how to undertake academic tasks typical of Higher Education
- ★ **Using structured activities and reflections**, to engage the mind, senses, and motor memory
- ★ **Offering insights** on how to tackle study activities that many students find difficult
- ★ **Providing resources** to help you evaluate, reflect upon and manage your studies more easily.

# How to use *The Study Skills Handbook*

## Decide what you need

Either dip into the book as you need – or work through the chapters to build your academic confidence and abilities in depth. Use as much or little as helps you.

Each chapter focuses on a key aspect of study. In practice, these are interconnected. Developing one area of your study will also help other aspects.

## Find what you need

To help you locate what you need at speed, the following are provided in addition to the Contents and Index.

- ★ An overview of each part (pages 7 and 169)
- ★ Learning outcomes at the start of each chapter
- ★ Individual page headers, for fast browsing
- ★ Visually distinct pages and cartoons, as memory triggers that help you locate and recall material more easily.

## Select from the resources

Select from the wide range of reflections, self-evaluations, planners, checklists, priority-setters, organisers and activities.

## Use the self-evaluations

Most chapters contain a self-evaluation. These can help you in several ways.

- ★ They are a useful starting point for considering what to prioritise next
- ★ They break major study skills into component parts, or tasks into key steps
- ★ They enable you to pinpoint which components or missing steps are undermining your performance so you can address these. Often, once you identify it, it is fairly straightforward to improve a particular skill
- ★ They enable you to monitor your progress and identify your developing strengths.

## Copiable pages

Pages containing self-evaluations, checklists, planners and record sheets may be copied for personal, individual re-use. If you use such copies, keep them with your reflective journal for future reference. Templates for most of these are also available on the companion site.



### The book's companion site

Visit [www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk](http://www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk) for interactive self-evaluations, study skills videos, and other useful links and resources.

This icon indicates that material such as templates of planners and checklists are available on the companion site.

## Take on the challenge

You can improve your academic performance. You can do well. How much and how well depend on you and your circumstances. Good study strategies, habits and understanding of how you learn empower you as a student. Look for the enjoyment in what you do.

There are times when being a student seems tough – for everyone. Those who stick with it and work on their study strategy get through, often doing much better than they expected. Difficult material can become comprehensible if you return to it after a gap. A growing knowledge of specialised terms and underlying theories helps you to make sense of your subject, sharpen your thinking and communicate with precision. Don't let past or present study difficulties stand between you and success.

## Keeping a journal

It is recommended that you maintain a log, personal blog, journal or similar record to help you think about your learning and studies and monitor your development.



This symbol reminds you to note down your reflections in your study journal. For details, see page 99.

## Where to begin?

There are many possible starting places apart from the obvious one of reading straight through. Here are a few suggestions.

- ➔ **Browse** through *The Study Skills Handbook* so you know roughly what is in it. Bookmark any pages you want to come back to early on. You will get a clearer idea of what you need once you start assignments.
- ➔ **Consider** the *Seven approaches to learning* on pages 4–5) – to understand the overall approach of *The Study Skills Handbook*.
- ➔ **Complete** the *What would success look like for me?* questionnaire (page 11) to help orientate yourself as a student.
- ➔ **Start with self-efficacy.** It underpins everything else. See Chapters 1–7 for core aspects of study success, such as time management, stress management, optimising learning and clarifying your purpose.
- ➔ **Prioritise.** Use the *Study skills: priorities* planner (pages 25–6) to focus your thinking.
- ➔ **Evaluate.** If you are unsure where to begin with a study skill, use the *Self-evaluation* questionnaire in the appropriate chapter to clarify your thinking.

### Gained Advanced Level or equivalent (BTEC, Access Diploma, IB, etc.)?

You have already achieved study success. The challenge, then, can be in recognising that there is still more you can do to improve your performance. It can be hard, at times, to stay quietly confident when surrounded by many other smart people. Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7 might be especially useful for you to ensure you focus your time, attention and emotional energies well. You can also hone all your other academic skills too.

### Had a study gap or lack confidence?

Work through the first few chapters. Understand as much as you can about learning and study in general, about how Higher Education works, and about what has influenced and affected your own

thinking about your studies. You may also find it especially helpful to look at:

- ★ identifying current skills and qualities (Chapter 3)
- ★ understanding ‘intelligence’ (Chapter 4)
- ★ activities for getting back into reading and writing, available on the companion site at [www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk](http://www.studyskillshandbook.co.uk).

### Dyslexic students

Thousands of dyslexic students graduate successfully every year. Many aspects of this book were developed with dyslexic students over many years. That includes:

- ★ the contents
- ★ the use of visual images
- ★ the book’s layout and colours
- ★ the emphasis on structure
- ★ the use of varied and multi-sensory approaches.

### International students

Be prepared for almost any aspect of study to be different from study back home. You might find it especially helpful to read Chapter 2 on getting the most from your course, and Chapters 12–16 on academic thinking and writing. International study is challenging, so use Chapter 7 to take care of your well-being.

### Pace yourself

It takes time and practice to orientate yourself to the Higher Education environment and to develop good study habits. If you have been away from study for a while or are finding study difficult, be kind to yourself.

Your first-year marks may not count towards the final grade, giving you time to practise and improve.

### Choose your own route

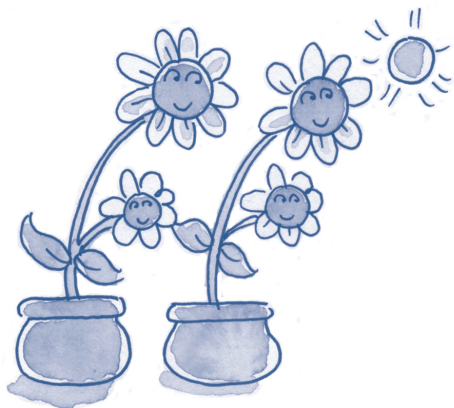
There are many avenues to successful study. Chapters 1–4 encourage you to look at what enhances your individual study, and offer suggestions on how to experiment with your learning to find ways to take it to the next level. Experiment. Explore. Be creative. Find what suits *you* best.

# Seven approaches to learning

*The Study Skills Handbook* is informed by seven approaches to learning.

## 1 Treating learning as an adventure

Small children treat life and learning as a big adventure. They are curious and learn extraordinary amounts without trying particularly hard – simply through being relaxed, observing, playing, questioning, trying things out for themselves, making mistakes, wanting to understand. They don't treat setbacks as failures nor do they worry about what others think or tell themselves they might not be able to learn. If they fall when learning to walk, they have another go, and another, until they succeed. Adults can learn in this way too – if they allow themselves.



Find a point of attraction

## 2 Using multiple senses and movement

The more we use our senses of sight, hearing and touch, and the more we use fine muscle movements in looking, speaking, writing, typing, drawing, checking, deciding, the more we help our brains to help us learn.

Combining the information from multiple senses and movements enables the brain to make more connections and

associations. These help it to make sense of the information, lay down memories and recall it better later. This book encourages you to use your senses to the full and to incorporate movement into your study to make learning easier and more engaging.

## 3 Identifying the attraction

It is easier to learn if we keep desirable outcomes in mind rather than force ourselves to study out of duty. Some aspects of study may be less attractive to you, such as writing essays, meeting deadlines or sitting exams, and yet these also tend to bring the greatest satisfaction and rewards.

You do have it in your power to find in any aspect of study an angle that sparks your curiosity, drives your personal motivation, or makes it meaningful – to find the hidden gold that attracts you. For example, visualise yourself on a large cinema screen enjoying your study – or your later rewards. Hear your own voice telling you what you are achieving now. Your imagination will catch hold of these incentives and find ways of making them happen.



Visualise your success



## 4 Using active learning

We learn with a deeper understanding when we are actively and personally engaged:

- ★ juggling information
- ★ struggling to make sense
- ★ playing with different options
- ★ making decisions
- ★ looking for links, connections, meaning, significance, solutions.

For this reason, most pages of this book require you to *do* something, however small, to help focus attention and increase your active engagement with the topic.

## 5 Taking responsibility for your learning

In Higher Education, it is expected that you will take on increasing responsibility for your learning and that you are ready and able to study under your own direction for much of the week, as a responsible adult. This prepares you to lead and manage, whether in academic life, work or other contexts.

This means developing a range of abilities, not least in being able to evaluate and make judgements about your own work, with a fair but critical eye, prioritising what needs further work, getting on with doing so, and monitoring how well you are doing what you planned to do. This *Study Skills Handbook* helps and encourages you to do that.



## 6 Trusting in your intelligence

Many students worry that they are not intelligent enough to do well, especially at times when the course seems tough. If they didn't do well at school, they can doubt whether academic ability is 'in their genes'. If they excelled at school, they can worry they have 'lost it'. Worry and stress make it harder to learn.

With the right preparation, attitude and strategy, it is likely you will do fine. Trust that you can achieve well – and make it happen. See Chapter 4 to consider this in more detail, and Chapter 7 for managing stress and anxieties.

## 7 Personalising your learning

Each of us learns in an individual way – and our circumstances, experiences and interests vary. We each enjoy particular aspects of the course or methods of assessment more than others. We connect with some material and not others. We might prefer to learn on our own or socially, digitally or with paper and artefacts; to be on campus or at home, and so on.

You can do well without personalising your learning, but you can make study more effective, efficient and enjoyable if you adapt how and when you go about it so that it fits you best. It is worth taking time to understand and consider the many factors that contribute to optimal learning and to work out what really works best for you (see Chapters 4 and 5).

It is likely that you will find different things work better for aspects of the course you feel confident about or enjoy, and those you don't, as well as for different tasks, the mood you are in, who you are learning with, how much time you have, or the time of the day.

Experiment with strategies and skills you currently under-use. The human brain is highly adaptable: able learners move easily between different strategies and approaches, depending on the task in hand.

As you are more in charge of your learning at this level, this provides opportunities to adapt the learning experience to suit you. The book provides many suggestions about how you can do this.

### Reflection



#### Seven Approaches to Learning

What is your initial response to these seven approaches to your learning and study?

Which do you feel characterise your own study strategy – and which are worth your considering further?

## A new beginning ...

From this introduction, you will probably have gleaned that an important premise of this book is that academic success is a consequence of many factors. Intellectual ability is one factor, but not necessarily the most important. You have the power to influence many of those contributing factors.

Whatever your experience of academic study in the past, it might not be the same in Higher Education. It is a new beginning. If you don't succeed as well as you wish, at first, there will be further opportunities to do better. Each year, each term or semester, each module or unit of study, gives you a chance to start afresh in the way you approach your study.

### *Always been good at study?*

It is likely that you have laid down some excellent foundations for higher level study. Let that boost your confidence. Nonetheless, even excellent students can find new ways of saving time, fine-tuning their study techniques, and adapting their strategy to meet the demands of higher level study.

### *Tend to coast along 'in the middle'?*

You have the opportunity to test out how well you could do if you aim higher and adapt your strategy. How far do you want to go? What would hold you back from achieving more? Would you get more satisfaction out of your studies if you brought more to them?

### *Didn't achieve well in the past?*

Many people thrive in the different atmosphere of Higher Education, even if they didn't at school. This can be because the teaching and curriculum suit them better or because they adopt new strategies and attitudes. If you under-achieved in the past, this might be welcome news. Your success is not determined by your past. This *Study Skills Handbook* was designed to help you challenge beliefs that have often led to students under-achieving. It provides practical steps forward.

### **Good strategies matter ...**

Students are often pleasantly surprised to find that they can achieve well, and more easily, if they develop study strategies relevant to their own ways of thinking and working, that fit their circumstances, and draw upon their personal interests and preferences. The best strategies tend to be broad-based, taking into consideration all your needs, including health and well-being, goals and enjoyment.

This book enables you to consider your student experience in the round, and to take a holistic approach to your study, life and success.

**Enjoy  
the book**

**I hope you enjoy  
*The Study Skills Handbook* –  
and your time as a student.**

# PART A

## Self-efficacy: Managing your Success as a Student

### You in the driving seat

In Higher Education, the key responsibility for academic success lies with you. You are the manager of your study. You have the prime influence over whether you do well and whether the experience is worthwhile, or not. Although there is usually a range of support and guidance available, ultimately, it comes back to you and to what you are prepared to do to ensure that you achieve the best you can with the least stress and greatest personal satisfaction.

Students who do well tend to be those who appreciate, early on, that higher level study is different from their previous experience, who grasp what this responsibility means, and who have the mindset and strategies to respond well to the challenge.

### Taking on the challenge

Being in control of your own learning brings benefits in terms of increased choices, more control of your time, and for developing a range of skills and personal attributes that will serve you well in your life and career. On the other hand, it isn't always easy. It requires a range of strong personal attributes to direct your learning successfully, to use time well, to interpret sensibly what is going on when study seems more difficult or when your motivation wanes. It can take courage and imagination to adapt your strategy and attitude when your current approach doesn't seem to deliver what you want.

### The importance of 'self-efficacy'

Self-efficacy or being able to 'manage yourself' can make a significant difference to your time as a student and beyond. It is one of the most important attributes to bring to study and to take into life beyond your course. It is worth spending time thinking about this and developing your self-management abilities.

Part A of this *Study Skills Handbook* provides background and approaches that help you to do this. It helps you to understand what characterises Higher Education and what self-efficacy means in that context. It encourages and assists you to think through crucial considerations such as:

- ★ your study purpose and longer-term goals;
- ★ what success would look like for you;
- ★ your strategies for managing time, stress, well-being, employability and career planning;
- ★ organising yourself ready for study and for avoiding common mistakes;
- ★ getting the most from your course and from your time as a student.

It provides you with structured activities and reflections to help you think through the important issues and to plan ahead for maximum success.



# Chapter 1

## Success as a student

### Take charge of your success



#### Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ gain an initial overview of how to achieve success in Higher Education
- ✓ understand what to expect and what characterises study in Higher Education
- ✓ clarify your own vision of success
- ✓ understand the study skills and attributes needed for higher level study
- ✓ consider your starting points and priorities for developing good study skills and habits
- ✓ set priorities for further developing your abilities.

#### A transformational experience

The experience of studying in Higher Education can be life-changing. Most graduates look back on this time with great fondness. In part, this is because of the unique opportunities it offers ...

- ★ to study interesting subjects
- ★ to feel stretched intellectually
- ★ to explore new ideas
- ★ to engage in a wide range of new activities, not easily available elsewhere
- ★ to find out about yourself and how you rise to the challenge of academic study
- ★ to consider the kind of person that you want to be in the world
- ★ to make friends that can last for life.

Higher level study is different from that at previous levels. This chapter helps you to identify how and why this is the case, and what this might mean for you as a student.

#### Making your success a reality

The more you engage with your course and actively hunt out the enjoyment in study and student life, the greater the likelihood that you will not only survive the experience, but thrive and excel, too.

This chapter helps you to understand what to expect, to consider what 'success' at this level of study means to you, and to decide how you will make the experience work for you.



# Make the experience work for you

Be an active agent on behalf of your own success. Start by considering some ways that your own action can make a difference.

## Reflection



### Taking charge

How will you 'take charge' of your experience as a student?  
What do you need to do first?

### Think through ...

- ★ how your studies contribute to your broader life plan and career ambitions
- ★ how other opportunities at college or university can forward your ambitions.

### Be well informed

Investigate. Read.  
Ask. Double check.

### Put the hours in

Expertise is largely a factor of how many hours you spend on an activity. This applies to study as for other skills. Using that time effectively is, of course, just as important.

### Take charge

Plan how you will use your time as a student to gain your broader life and career aims.  
Don't wait to be told – find out.  
Don't wait to be asked – do it.  
Don't wait to be inspired – inspire yourself.  
Don't wait for opportunities – create them.  
Don't rely only on feedback from others; learn to make sound evaluations of your work.  
Don't neglect your well-being – include it in your goals.

### Develop the right mindset

Intellectually curious and open to new perspectives.  
Strongly motivated and determined to succeed.  
Resilient, persistent and persevering.

### Make wise choices that work for you

To achieve what you want, choose the right ...

- ★ degree subject
- ★ modules or topics
- ★ use of your time in and out of class.

### Understand higher level study

How and why it is different.  
What is expected.  
What you need to know about the conventions and culture.  
What is regarded as important in your subject and what gains the best grades.

### Decide what you want ...

- ★ from your study
- ★ from the broader experience of being in Higher Education.

### Use the opportunities

Use resources, support and facilities on campus, online, in the local area, through student organisations.  
Use feedback from tutors.  
Take extra classes, learn new skills, stretch yourself.  
Learn something outside of your subject area – take up a new language or complete an enterprise project.  
Use chances of a work placement or year abroad.  
Network with others.  
Make friends for life.

## Your vision of success as a student

### A return on your investment

Students invest a great deal of time, energy and money in their education, so success matters. There are many different versions of what that success would look like. Your vision won't be the same as others'.

If you can formulate a clear vision of what success as a student means to you, you are more likely to achieve it. The way you conceive of success will influence how you spend your time and direct energies which, in turn, will affect your achievement and experience.

#### Reflection



#### Think forward

Our imaginations are extremely powerful. You can use this to help direct your energies. For example, picture yourself 10 years into the future. Will you be impressed by the choices you are making now, and your use of the time and opportunities available to you? Will you wish that you had done anything differently?

#### Reflection



#### Use your vision to direct your energies

What do your choices opposite indicate about:

- ★ what 'success' as a student would look like for you?
- ★ how to direct your energies as a student?

### What would success look like for me?

Use the following questions to help you to plan. Check off ✓ all items that apply to you. Then **highlight** those that are most important to you.

#### *I would feel I had made a success of university/college if:*

##### Career

- I gained a qualification that enabled me to develop my career
- I developed skills which helped me find a good job
- I made full use of the opportunities available
- I took on positions of responsibility that helped my CV
- I made good contacts that helped my career.

##### Transformational experience

- I learnt more about who I am as a person
- I became a different person as a result of my experience
- I developed a range of skills and qualities that improve my life
- I developed in personal confidence
- I developed a broader understanding of the world
- I met and learnt from people I wouldn't have met otherwise.

##### Subject and qualifications

- I learnt a lot about a subject that really interested me
- I got a good class of degree
- I stretched myself intellectually
- I developed academically.

##### Life and personal

- I really enjoyed myself
- I made good friends
- I developed new interests that enrich my life
- I learned to manage myself as an effective adult.

## Success as a student: what lecturers say

Students who do best at university are those who are very determined to succeed, plan how they will do it, and then keep their plans in perspective.



The students who stand out to me are those who don't just read what is on the reading list, but who genuinely want to know all they can about the subject – who surprise you by having read an article just published or have a good grip on the most recent debates in the subject.



Study is important – of course, I would say that. But college life is about much more than that. It can and should be a life-changing experience – a time to have your ideas challenged, to meet people from an incredibly wide range of backgrounds, to think how your education could change your own life and that of others.



I would say that the key factor is time. If students put in the hours, they tend to do well. Of course, you do need to use the time well too.



What helps students to succeed at Uni? Most students do achieve their degree and then go on to get a job, so that suggests there are many different routes to success. Mainly, it's about the basics. Find out what you have to do, do it, and stay the course. Do more, and your marks will be better.



Students need to keep their eyes on their long-term goals. If they want a good job, it won't hurt to have a good degree but they also need to show they have experience of other things. They need to get out and do things for the community, get a job, have ideas and opinions, show they are their own person.



Universities provide the opportunities. It is then up to the students to make those opportunities work for them.



The best students for me are those who really grapple with the issues, who show they have tried to think things through for themselves, even if they haven't got it all right. The worst are those that rely on Wikipedia as their main source of information – and think no-one will notice!



As a lecturer, I like the students who love their subject and want to know as much as they can about it. As the parent of a student myself, I think it important that students use their time at university wisely. If they want an academic career, then they should put the subject first. If they want a career outside of academia, then they need to think more broadly.



### Reflection



#### Student success

What can you take away from these lecturers' observations to help you succeed?

It isn't just about how much work you put in. You can actually get away with doing much less work than others and do better than them – but you can't get away without thinking about what you are doing and learning.



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