

Top tips for effective learning

1. Get organised: have a plan

It's entirely up to you to organise your study – so make sure you know what you're doing from day one. You may find that assignment deadlines clash, so some forward planning to stagger your completion will save you a lot of panic. There's plenty of help and advice available if you're unsure about how to do anything – your tutor, subject advisor or the Academic Skills Centre staff are all good people to ask.

2. Iron out the details

Make sure you find out about things like timetables, room locations, deadlines and guidelines for assignments. Remember, it's your own responsibility to do this – there's no-one to remind you! Your programme handbook will contain lots of the information you need, but do make sure to fill in the gaps yourself. Take note of the names of key people within your first week – especially administrative staff: they often know a lot more about the everyday workings of the university than anyone else, and can often help in an emergency!

3. You can't learn everything

Don't expect to read every book or journal on your topic – there're millions of potentially useful texts out there, none of which have been read by one single person. Be both a selective and active reader – spend time thinking about what you want to find out before you begin. Choose a few texts to read in-depth as opposed to skimming over many. If you can't get hold of a particular text on your reading list, don't worry – ask the library staff for help and you're bound to end up with something just as useful.

4. Make notes you can use

Make useful notes, not pages and pages for the sake of writing, but those that are clear, concise and to the point. If you try to write down everything the lecturer says, it's much more difficult to focus on listening. Take note of all the main points and underline or highlight important ones to make them more obvious – you can then revisit these at a later time. Annotate and add thoughts of your own, but make it clear that they're your own ideas. Make sure you check the handouts – you may not need to note things like dates and figures. Once you're finished in the lecture, revisit, and condense your notes for optimum clarity, making sure you follow-up any points you weren't sure of or questioned at the time. You'll be glad you did when it's time to write up your assignment or revise for the exam.

5. Have a distinct and individually-reached point of view

Be sure to develop your own arguments. You can begin by asking yourself "what do I think about this?" then ask yourself why. The reason you think a certain way about something might be in response to something you've read, something you picked up from a TV or radio programme, or even something from your own experience. By applying this personal spin, the argument you develop will always bear your own personal signature and will be supported by good evidence that you can explain logically. This will help you to explain your arguments to others – a very useful trait in your academic life. Even if you later find that someone else came to the same conclusion as you did, there's a deep satisfaction in knowing that you followed your own logic to this established point. During your write-up, every statement or argument you make needs to be backed-up with evidence and demonstrate thorough critical thinking. If your argument is your own, then you can easily explain how reasoning helped you to reach your conclusion – if it convinces you, it will convince others.

6. Understand and be able to demonstrate your understanding

At university it's not quantity of knowledge, but quality of understanding that counts. That usually means being familiar with major issues and debates in your field, and being able to put what you've found out about the topic into that specific context. Very importantly, It also means that you must be able to communicate your understanding to others, so a good knowledge of how to structure your work and write clearly and academically is an essential part of being a successful student.

7. Think critically

Don't take anything for granted – question everything. Think carefully and, above all, critically about all that you read, see or hear. Decide whether you agree or disagree with something and then, most importantly, reflect on why you think the way you do. You can't rely on the fact that it's written in a book or journal, or that your lecturer said so – you're responsible for your own thinking and you must be able to say why you reach certain conclusions.

8. Cite them right

You'll be expected to include every source that you've used while researching an assignment in your bibliography. You're also expected to add a reference within your text whenever you use a direct quote, paraphrase or idea from someone else's work. Try to steer clear of using lots of long quotes, as this fills up your word count with someone else's work – not advisable. Instead, try to get into the habit of using shorter quotes of a few words whenever you can – and make sure they're relevant, if not absolutely necessary, to the point you're trying to make. Ask yourself, "have I demonstrated how this quote supports my argument?". If you haven't, or it doesn't help your explanation or line of reasoning, then ditch it. Your department will have a preferred style, so make sure you check what it is.

9. Don't be afraid to ask for help

Nobody finds it easy when they first arrive at university. You'll be meeting all kinds of new people, and won't know your way around or what's expected of you straight away. Don't worry no matter how confident some people appear, there're moments of trepidation for everyone when they first arrive. Another responsibility you'll have to deal with on arrival is to yourself – you need to be able to recognise when you need help and to know where you go to find it. Around campus and beyond, there is an army of people whose job it is to make sure you're okay – but they have to be asked for help. If you get stuck, talk to your personal tutor, a Learning Skills Advisor or a counsellor.

10. Develop yourself and your skills

Your university career is a unique time in your life – you may never get another opportunity to concentrate on your own skills development for such a sustained period. Your study practices will evolve and develop as you progress, and the more experience you have, the better you will become. Try to learn from the feedback from your tutors, and by reflecting on what you do well, or could do better. Remember, this is the best time to try things out – be daring and experimental, and always try to learn from what you do: teach yourself these lessons now, and they'll last a lifetime!