

Essential Study Skills Starter Kit

The most important things to know to get you on the path to better study practices

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Introduction

Learning how to study effectively takes time and practice. There are many different techniques and systems available, so much so, that sometimes you might feel overwhelmed about even getting started.

Don't worry. Help is at hand. The important thing is to get started, and to know where to start. This mini e-book will help with just that.

I don't want to waste too much time with details. You can easily subscribe to my e-course if you haven't already at [Your Study Mentor](http://www.yourstudymmentor.com) where you will receive many tips on how to improve your study technique over time. You will eventually develop your own system for study and success will follow.

This book deals with the essential basics you need for effective study. I don't claim to cover everything you need to know, because as you will know from reading my articles or other e-books, I think it is important to get to work as soon as possible. It's possible to spend too much time reading about study, beating around the bush, when you really need to just get stuck in.

So I've put together, a few of the most important aspects of effective study. They may be new to you, or they may be familiar to you. But the one thing I ask is that you make an honest effort to try them out if you haven't already. If you haven't yet got a system that works for you, or if you find you take too long to study, or can't recall what you need to know, then you need to try to improve your technique.

So what do you need to know to get started? At the most basic level, you need to read effectively, take notes well, and recall information. These are covered in the following sections. I've also included two sections on what I think may be the most important approaches to studying – how to avoid wasting time, and the importance of working without the text as a crutch.

So let's get started.

How to read effectively

Let's face it, for most academic courses; you are going to spend a lot of time reading. It will usually be the primary way to obtain the information you need

even if you have to go and learn by doing later. So it makes sense if your study success depends on it to invest some time in improving this invaluable skill.

We take reading and improving our reading for granted. When you learned to read as a child there were various steps and stages to be reached until you could say 'I can read'.

Usually though, once we reach a certain stage, reading becomes a tool to learn other things and we stop learning to read in itself. And although the act of reading more and more does help enormously, we need to consciously think about how we read, and to stretch ourselves that bit more to reach new standards, especially if our progress is dependent on the speed at which we acquire our knowledge.

It will take you some effort. It always does to change habits and push our limits. But, the results will be well worth it.

You could double your speed and retention, depending on your current state and how much you are willing to put into it. There are many books and courses available on speed reading and my e-course addresses some of these, but for now let's look at some general tips that you could implement right now and improve your reading skill.

1. Learn to adjust the type of reading you do to the task in hand. Reading something technical, a novel, history, a newspaper, these all take slightly different approaches.
2. Scan your text at increasingly detailed levels until you've obtained the information you need. Titles, subtitles, diagrams, summaries, introductions and last paragraphs first. This will impress the structure of the knowledge on your mind, show you where you need to concentrate, and prime your mind to receive new information.
3. Use a pencil or your finger as a guide. It has been shown that physically following your pencil across the page can increase your speed and concentration. Force yourself to go faster and faster, keeping up with your guide.
4. Don't stop at difficult parts. Don't try to understand everything at first. A little question mark is all you need to remind you, and you can come back to it on a later 'scan'.
5. Read words in groups, don't concentrate on one word at a time.
6. When you've finished a scan, brainstorm what you remember, so for your next scan you'll know where the gaps are, and where you need to concentrate a bit more and read in a bit more depth. This recollection itself is a very important part of the study process as well as a help to read more effectively.

How to take notes – one way that works well

So often note taking by students involves highlighting or underlining huge chunks of their text, or transcribing definitions, text and diagrams to such an extent that they practically rewrite the book they are studying! Are you guilty of this? Don't worry you are not alone, especially if no one has ever showed you a better way.

This common, but mistaken way of taking notes, usually stems from an anxiety about leaving something out, or a need to be writing to feel like you are working and learning. Unfortunately, this is not the way to learn, and can even be a subtle form of procrastination.

If you haven't already then, try this simple method for note-taking:

- Draw a wide margin down the side of your page
- Read your chosen amount of material
- Brainstorm to try and recall the main points from what you have read. Write keywords and phrases on the right hand side of the page. No sentences or diagrams. Leave plenty of space between each line.
- You will be aware of sections you can't remember at all. Don't worry, this will make you more receptive to absorb this information when you reread.
- Check through the text again, noting points you missed.
- Brainstorm again. See if you can fill in the gaps.
- Tidy up the notes then. Number the main points – it's easier to remember numbered lists. Add in any points that are still absent. Don't get carried away with polishing up your notes though – beware of procrastination. You need to learn fast and move on to the next task.
- Write any page references for definitions or diagrams alongside the keywords in the margin. Don't copy diagrams for example – you can practice them later and refer to them using the page reference any time you need to.
- Quickly review your keywords, and see if each one sparks off the points you wanted to remember. If it doesn't, maybe add another keyword for clarification.

Now you have a page of good notes to work from. Test yourself to see how many keywords you can remember on a separate page and circle any you couldn't recall so that you will pay more attention to them during future revision sessions. You will need to revise these within a day, or you will forget what you learned, and then again within a week, a fortnight and then a month. But when you revise, it should only take five minutes, so it should be easy to incorporate this revision into your study sessions.

There are of course, different ways of approaching note making, and there is more to be said about the above steps once you get to grips with the basics. But start there if you have never tried consciously to develop your note making skills. Do it now, tonight. Whatever work you have to cover today, try it this way. Try it until your next test, and see the difference it makes.

Recalling what you have learned

The very act of trying to recall what you have learned is what will help you add your knowledge to long term memory. If you find you can't remember details, it doesn't mean that there is something wrong with your memory; it just means that you didn't put it in correctly in the first place! If you continually try to recall what you've just read, you will make yourself aware of what you still haven't absorbed properly and you will reinforce in your mind the points you have learned.

As for the parts you haven't yet learned properly, knowing that you had trouble with them will make them stand out when you reread your text or your notes, so that you will be more likely to remember them the next time. If you use the technique mentioned in note-taking above and circle those parts, you will also be keeping a record for yourself of where you need to focus during subsequent revision sessions.

To aid recall, the old fashioned method whereby you read, repeat out loud, check, repeat again, etc. will serve you well. Repeating out loud will ensure that you actually can recall the information, rather than glossing over it. And for those that you find that you consistently cannot remember, you will have to find some other way. Try making up a silly rhyme or phrase, add to a line of music from a song, imagine a ridiculous picture with the items all involved – the sillier, and more outlandish the better. You won't forget it then.

There are many other ways to improve your memory. The focus of this e-book though is to get you started, and the above methods will bring you a long way. Other techniques will take some time to perfect and will take some investment of time on your part, which will help you in the long term. But if you want to learn more you can sign up at [Your Study Mentor](http://YourStudyMentor.com) if you haven't already, or check out some of the resources at the end of this e-book.

Work without the book

One of the most important secrets of successful study

Being a teacher gives me the enviable opportunity to watch and learn from so many of my students. It gives me an insight into how most people tackle homework, assignments, problems, and so on. Time and again I see the one mistake that makes the difference between mediocre learning and real learning. And the solution is very simple.

When you have a question to answer based on your topic of study always, always, always answer without the text in front of you. When you take notes, do it without the text. When you have a problem to solve, leave the text while you try it yourself. When you try to recall information, cover the text. Let's shorten the idea for emphasis; **WITHOUT THE TEXT!**

This sounds simple, but is not the commonest way of tackling homework or study. Think about it and tell me honestly, the last time you had to study something and take notes, did you read a bit, copy down an important point, or a definition and then read a bit more, copy a bit more and so on?

If you had a series of questions to answer, did you read the question, and then go and look for the answer in the text, write the answer, maybe copying a phrase or word in the process, and then proceed to the next question?

Do you ever copy down important definitions or quotations straight from the text?

When you tackle a maths problem, are you likely to follow through the example and carry out the steps as you see them in the text?

Do you copy diagrams from your text into your notes?

All of these examples are not the worst ways to study. At least you are working, getting those questions done for the next day, or compiling those notes for future reference. But they are not the best! And especially if you find that you feel that you have worked hard, and yet don't get the results you hoped for, you need to change your approach. You will see the difference!

So continue to answer those homework questions or take those notes or solve those problems, but do them, yes, you've got it, without the text!

Of course, you need the text to learn from. But never copy directly from it, even if the end result is that you have answers written or notes taken. Because for some strange reason, I have noticed that it is possible for information to pass through the eyes from a text and out along the arm onto the page without passing through the brain! The work will be done, but the retention or actual learning will be nowhere near as effective as it would have been doing it without the text.

Ever had a 'blank' in an exam? Ever felt the information was on the tip of your tongue, but couldn't get it out? Ever had the experience of coming out from an

exam, and hearing the answer from someone else or reading it in your notes and thinking, 'Aaahh, I knew that!'

These are common symptoms of studying with too much dependence on the text. The familiarity you feel, comes from being exposed to the text (which is better than someone who never did the work in the first place, of course) but you are not actually internalising it.

So, if you're taking notes, read the text, close it and then write some notes. If you're answering questions, read the text to your satisfaction, then put it aside and answer as many questions as you can without it, leaving gaps to be filled later. These 'knowledge gaps' are important to your study.

If you're solving a problem or writing out a definition or using a formula, read the text first, write down what you think the answer is, and then, and only then, go back to the text. And even then, don't copy it down. Try again without the text.

Each time you do this, you are pulling information from your own head, not from the page. And you'll know for sure if it's there or not. Do it often enough, and it will still be there the day of the test!

Studying like this is harder at first. You will be tempted back to the lazier way. Yes, I know you think you're working hard getting that work done, but it is a lazier way. You'll know this when you try to change; you won't feel like doing it without the text, you'll feel it takes too long, or takes too much effort. And it will at first. But persevere, and soon you will reap the rewards, and it will get easier and quicker the more you practice.

Getting the most from your study time – Using variety to beat inattention during study periods.

When you study, do you find time slipping by with little progress sometimes? You're doing your best to concentrate on reading your course material, but keep catching yourself daydreaming, and realise you are still on the same sentence as you were five minutes ago? It happens to us all. So, what can you do to keep yourself on track? Here are a few tips that work for me.

First of all be aware of your level of concentration. Don't let the time go by without getting value for money from it. If you aren't focussed, admit that to yourself and think about how to fix it.

Make sure the basics are sorted first. Although these are not the main focus of this chapter they are still important. They may seem obvious, but overlooking them can mean you are working inefficiently.

Are you tired? Have you eaten well? Do you need fresh air or exercise? Is the room too hot, or lacking in air? Fix these things quickly, but don't use them as an excuse to avoid study, get back to it as soon as possible! Set a time for returning to the books and stick to it. Get a healthy snack, have plenty of water on hand, open a window, work in a cool room while wearing some extra clothing, get some quick exercise to wake yourself.

If you are really tired and haven't slept enough, but need to keep going, try a quick power nap or a relaxation exercise.

Are you distracted by some emotional upset? Try some meditation for a few minutes, and if you still can't let it go, go talk to someone.

You may not be able to fix all of these distracters; sometimes you just have to get on with it under less than perfect conditions, but do whatever you can to make your study time more productive.

What I want to concentrate on in this chapter however, is the actual study you do, and how you do it. Your mindset is very important. Approach the work with an attitude of getting the work done as quickly and efficiently as possible. With this in mind, think of the work you need to complete, set yourself a target and get stuck in.

Always have a small goal in mind and a time frame. Reward yourself with a short break when you achieve one of these goals and then proceed to the next one.

Be aware of your level of attentiveness. Variety in the type of study you do can help a lot to maintain your concentration. If you have some reading to do, some learning to do, maybe some writing or problem solving, all within the same topic that you have to cover, then switching from one task to another when you find you are bored or inattentive can help your mind stay fresh and avoid ineffective study. That way you'll still be learning, and finishing work that needs to be done, without drifting aimlessly.

Start, for example, with some speed reading, get through as much as you can, asking yourself frequently to recall the main points of what you have read.

When you can't keep this up productively anymore, go and find an exercise from the text to reinforce what you were doing, or brainstorm some points for an essay you will have to write on the topic, or start writing under one of the headings from a previous brainstorming session, or draw a diagram.

Change to any other task that you need to work on that can be used to give your mind a break without actually leaving the table. Then, after a short while get back to the reading again, if that's the most urgent part of your study. Get the idea?

Don't forget to remain aware of yourself. Are you doing what you really need to be doing? Or are you avoiding something important? Stay focussed.

Sometimes, if you're on a roll, and you are getting really involved and absorbed in your work, you may not need to change tasks. Only do so when you find you can't concentrate or you don't feel you are getting the most from your efforts. And make sure you don't waste time working on a task that doesn't really need to be done.

But keep on working, until you've achieved your goal for that study period. If this doesn't work, then maybe you genuinely need a rest. But make sure you decide what time you'll get back to work, and stick to it!

It's up to you now!

I really want you to go now, and get started improving the ways you study. So try these techniques out. Be wary of cynicism. You may have heard advice similar to these tips before, and feel that there's nothing new, but have you given them an honest trial run?

Yes, the information about how to study is important, and you do need to keep an eye on your own study skills, and on ways you can improve, but above all, you need to try the techniques. Give them a chance. Use them. Practice and be open to change.

If you have a system that works, then that's great. Chances are though, if you are reading this in the first place, that you are looking for a better way (or even trying to get started on the right track).

So try new ways. Work at it. Be smart about your approach. Don't just continue as you are if what you are doing is not getting the results you want. Find out what works for you.

Here's to your future success!

If you would like to learn more, try my one of my other e-books, [How to Cram](#) or [How to Study](#).

Or subscribe to my free e-course at [Your Study Mentor](#).

Other Resources

[Phenomenal Memory](#) to develop your memory skills.

[Rocket Reader](#) to train yourself to speed read.

Don't forget, this is a free e-book and if you find it helpful, feel free to pass it on without any changes, to other students.

Good luck!

Steve Bracken