

# DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE STUDY STRATEGIES

SKILLS FOR OU STUDY



Studying can be more enjoyable if you take time to think about how you learn effectively. This booklet takes you through some areas to think about.

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# 1 OVERVIEW

Your capacity to learn can be improved by:

- being motivated
- having a clear purpose
- analysing how you do things
- being willing to try new things
- recognising what works best for you.

If you take some time to think through how you as an individual learn effectively, you'll find that:

- studying will be more enjoyable
- it will be easier to understand module material
- you'll tend to remember module themes, concepts or techniques, which will help when you come to write assignments or prepare for exams.

Finding out about how you learn can help you to develop study techniques that suit your needs and the task at hand. Improving your study strategies will save you time, lighten your workload and help to improve the quality of your work.

Spend a bit of time taking stock while you're studying. You'll be able to recognise your strengths and make sensible decisions about how to deal with problems. Learning from feedback on your module assignments, reflecting and being prepared to try new things are important aspects of being an independent and effective learner.

It's also important to keep in mind two things about learning.

- There's no single method of learning that guarantees success and you'll need to find out which approaches work well for you – this may also depend on the task at hand.
- Although we all differ in the way we learn, some approaches and methods tend to be effective for many of us (e.g. active reading and being creative in taking notes).



Search the [Help Centre](#) for active reading and notetaking techniques.

Particular subjects do require you to develop particular learning skills. For example, you can try to learn computer programming by reading about it, but it's easier and more appropriate to learn by actually programming and writing computer programs.

Subjects also have their own particular research traditions, academic practices and conventions. For example, a psychology student writing up an experimental report for their module needs to keep to the accepted practices of reporting research studies in the field. As you progress in your studies you'll therefore become increasingly familiar with specific study approaches, as well as generic techniques.

If you move between different subject areas (for example, from art history to a science module) then you'll soon see that you need to develop the skills that the new subject requires – interpreting complex graphs, for example.

## 1.1 Learning outcomes

Your module has learning outcomes that outline the key intellectual, practical and professional skills you should gain during your study. These skills are usually categorised into four groups.

- Knowledge and understanding – gaining specific knowledge related to a subject (e.g. facts and concepts in scientific areas).
- Cognitive skills – thinking skills, such as problem solving and analysis.
- Practical and professional skills – skills related to a vocational area (e.g. web design or lesson planning).
- Key skills – skills gained as a result of study, such as communication skills and time management.

Learning outcomes can help you to be clear about what you'll learn on a module and the kinds of skills you'll develop.

## 1.2 Your learning history

The factors that are likely to affect your approach to learning and studying include:

- your experiences as a learner, both in formal education (e.g. at school) and informally (e.g. learning at a museum)
- your motivations (such as the reasons why you've chosen a particular module of study)
- your feelings or emotions that relate to your previous experiences of learning
- your existing strengths, preferences, habits and skills.

These factors can influence how you approach your current study and may influence the study techniques you tend to use.

## Your experiences as a learner

Think about your experiences of learning, either when you were growing up or more recently, e.g. at work. Try to identify:

- an enjoyable and effective learning experience
- an experience that wasn't enjoyable, or where you perhaps struggled to understand or learn something.

Reflect on why the first was more effective, and what the difficulties were with the less positive experience.

It's likely that you'll have some emotional feelings about why you remembered these particular experiences. Emotions and feelings are often part of our learning, and recognising this – and resolving any tensions in our feelings about learning – is an important part of developing as a learner.

By looking at your experiences you can:

- begin to take control of your learning
- try effective techniques that will see you through your studies.



# 2

## ACTIVE LEARNING

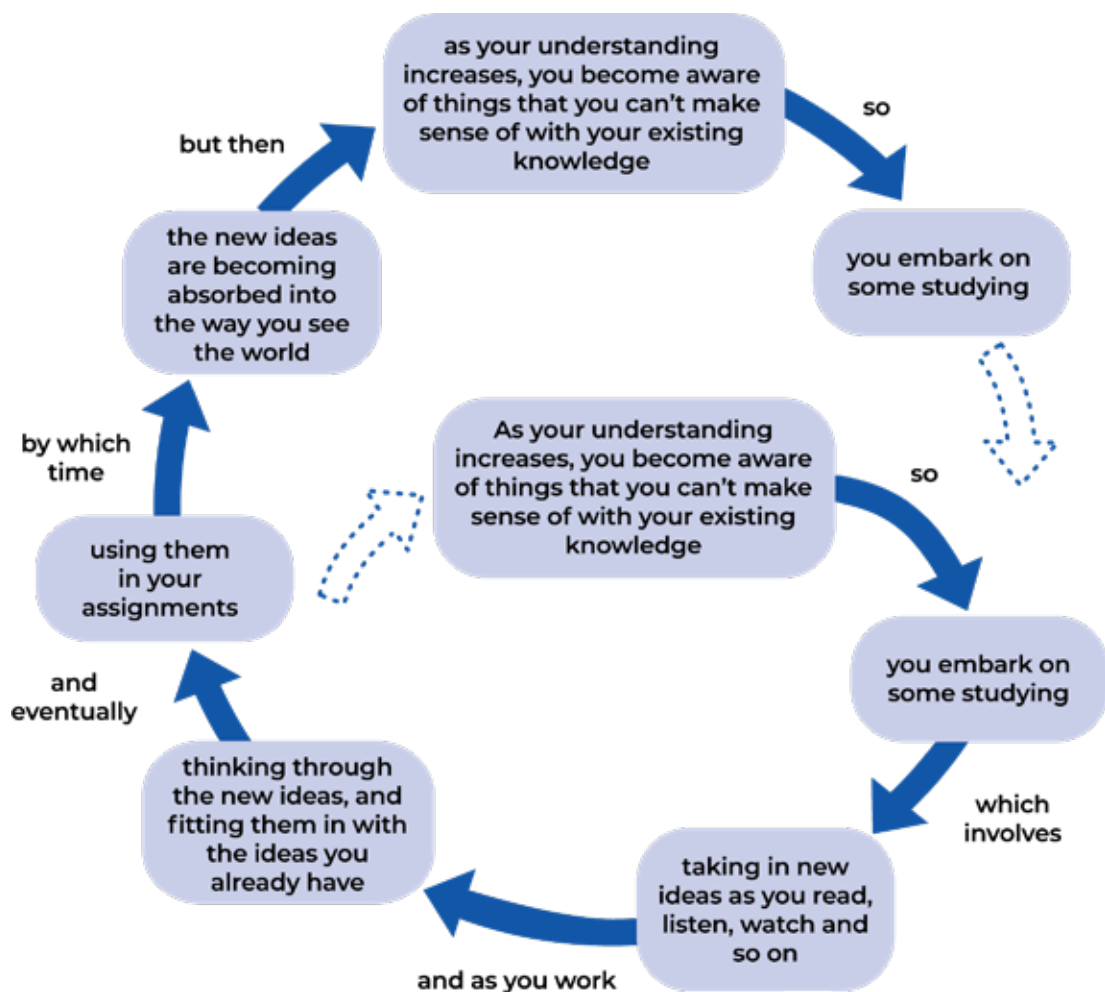
In active learning you engage with the subject matter or topic areas, and think through the module themes, methods, ideas and concepts.

It's sometimes too easy to simply get out your materials and read, rather than working out how to understand the module material.

Take an active approach by:

- building on your existing knowledge
- continually asking questions about the topic you're studying
- doing things that help make the topic meaningful to you, such as taking notes.

Think of learning as an ongoing process in which you improve your understanding. Some people visualise this as a spiral (see Figure 1). For example, as you 'move around' the spiral sometimes you realise that the ideas you once had difficulty grasping are now clearer to you, and you want to move on to take in new ideas and think them through.



**Figure 1** The Learning Spiral (adapted from Northedge, A. and Lane, A.,1997)

To be successful in your studies you also need to feel motivated and want to learn. Ideally, you're interested in the module and have identified your own goals. You might have:

- short-term goals (e.g. getting to grips with a difficult concept, completing an assignment)
- long-term goals (e.g. career development, passing a module or obtaining a qualification).

This approach helps when you need to get going with a study task and when you want to find ways to manage your time and prioritise.

Sometimes study strategies or skills are presented as if they'll work for most, if not all students. You'll find preferences, styles or habits that work for you. It's worth bearing in mind that strategies may vary with context, study tasks and activities. Try to identify what works for you generally, and which strategies are valuable for more specific activities.

“ I learn mostly by listening. I thought, I'm going to get myself a digital voice recorder and tape myself. So now that's exactly what I do. I tape myself reading passages in my book, or whatever, and I record pertinent points on my digital recorder. Then I can play them back on my iPod. It's really good for on the move as well as when I'm at home. ”

You may find that you prefer to learn from a hands-on approach, for example, by visiting a museum to help you with a topic in science. Some students find that they're good at remembering information visually and use mind maps or learning posters that they can pin on the wall. Others prefer to listen to a recording from their module materials as it's easier for them to process information this way.

## 2.1 The importance of feedback

Learning from feedback is important for developing as a learner. Continuous assessment at The Open University (OU) isn't just a way of judging your performance as a student, it's also part of learning – but you do need to engage with this process.

A great deal of learning takes place through completing module activities and assignments and then getting feedback on them. For example, during the module you may use online discussion forums for a module activity where you work with other students. This gives you the chance to get feedback on your ideas or understanding of a topic.

You'll get feedback on your assignments and you should look at it carefully each time as there may be advice you'll want to use in future assignments to enhance your marks. Sometimes it helps to wait a few days to read the feedback again, as you may find that you can then be more objective.

- Are the comments expected?
- Do you agree with the comments? If not, in what ways do you disagree?
- What steps can you take to address the issues raised in the comments?
- What specific skills do you think you need to improve?

Ask your tutor if you have any queries about anything in the feedback or for advice on improving your study skills.



# 3

## LEARNING SKILLS

Learning skills are also often called study skills or key skills and are included in the learning outcomes for your module. Examples of these skills include:

- organisational skills (e.g. planning and scheduling how to complete an assignment)
- communication skills (e.g. reading and understanding different sources, and writing in a style that's appropriate to the task)
- numeracy skills (e.g. constructing graphs and applying statistical techniques).

Understanding which skills are needed for a task and how effective you are at using them is important. But learning skills aren't acquired in isolation—you have to be studying something to practise or develop them.

Being aware of what you're good at and where you need to develop your skills can be the first step to boosting your confidence and improving your performance as a student. We all have skills that we've used successfully in our lives, and you can use these effectively in your studies.

If you find there's a specific skill that you need to develop, such as understanding graphs or making notes as you read, then make a decision to improve that skill and set aside the time to do it.

It's easy to become stuck in a study routine that isn't actually very effective for the task in hand. Thinking about your own skills and being aware of those you tend to use may help you to:

- see how to make changes
- develop new ways of working
- become more aware of the different techniques you could use.

Try searching the [Help Centre](#) for 'study skills', or for a particular skill you'd like to improve.





# 4

## BEING REFLECTIVE

Reflection has an important role to play in learning and self-development. It could be described as:

- thinking with a purpose
- being critical, but not negative
- analysing how effective your learning is
- questioning and probing
- making judgements and drawing conclusions.

There are different types of reflection. For example, question-based reflection can be used in a structured way on a module to guide you through the reflective process. Here you reflect by answering questions which are used as prompts. In contrast, open reflection is relatively unstructured, and techniques such as free writing and mind mapping are used to generate ideas (Cottrell, 2003).

Get used to reviewing and reflecting as part of your everyday learning. In this way, each experience, whether positive or negative, contributes to your development and personal growth. An experience that's repeated without reflection is just a repetition, which doesn't help you to learn.

- See reflection as complementary to your study.
- Use it to clarify your thoughts and focus on your development.
- Record your thoughts on any difficulties or challenges you're facing.
- Think about any strategies that might help you deal with difficult tasks or assignments.
- Use reflection to help you think about how the module topics relate to other areas of your experience.

## 4.1 Tools for reflection

The areas you focus on for reflection are specific to you, as are the tools you use to record your reflections. You may need to try a few before you find one that suits you best, and your choice may change as time goes by (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Tools for reflection include:

- learning journals or diaries
- structured forms
- mind maps
- recording yourself on audio.

Writing a reflective learning journal is a common and valuable approach. You can structure each journal entry with, for example, the date, what you did and your reflections about what you think you learnt. It's worth experimenting with different structures.

- Some could be ready-made, such as a diary with a day to a page.
- Or use your own creation – a note book in which you've stuck your study timetable and perhaps some postcards here and there to inspire you.

“ I've come a long way since doing my first TMA – I suppose I'm starting to develop some reflective skills in that I'm looking back at how my study sessions have gone and having a go at identifying the strategies that work well for me. ”

Date	25 <sup>th</sup> April
Description of event	Tutorial
What did I learn?	Clarified Block 3 themes and linked them to what I need to know for the exam.
Short-term implications	Useful for the TMA in 3 weeks.
Long-term implications	Remember to come back to the themes when I'm revising.
Feedback from others	I found that other students were also confused about the meaning of Section 2 – some of us are going to discuss it a bit more on the forum.
What will I do differently?	Get in contact more with other students – it helps to know that others get confused by things on the module too and talking about it seems to help. I'll make more use of the forums.
Notes	I've still got a query about the TMA question – must ask my tutor.

**Figure 2** An example of structured reflection

25/4

Went to the tutorial today – it was good to see some of the other students again.

It was also useful because I'm now clearer about the Block 3 themes, which should help when I prepare for the exam.

I'm now thinking about the TMA which is due in a few weeks – I'll talk to the tutor about the question.

Talking with other students today made me realise that it's not just me that gets confused by some of the sections – I'll try and use the forums more often so I can keep in touch with other students and discuss bits of the module.

**Figure 3** An example entry from a learning journal

## Keeping a reflective learning journal

Here are some tips for keeping a learning journal or diary.

- Write regularly – short entries are fine.
- Focus on a specific issue or problem for an individual entry – think about how you could address or resolve the issue, or what you'd like to improve.
- Use questions or prompts – these can help you focus on the task.
- Avoid descriptive writing – instead, be critical and analytical in your approach. You need to question, disagree, argue and evaluate.
- Use creative notetaking techniques such as mind mapping, or draw diagrams, sketches or cartoons. Use colour to make these more engaging and memorable.
- Review your entries over a period of time (e.g. in the past few weeks, or for a study activity, such as completing an assignment). See if you can find themes in your entries and recognise what long-term action you might need to take (e.g. to improve a particular study skill).

The process of writing itself can be a learning tool. It is a way to explore ideas as a way of understanding them.

For many of us, reflection becomes more meaningful if it can be shared, either in a group or with another individual. Putting your thoughts and ideas into words and getting a response from someone else, then perhaps listening to their reactions, makes the process more interactive and developmental. This can be face-to-face, by telephone or online, with another student or with a friend.



# 5 MANAGING YOUR TIME AND SPACE

When it comes to effective learning you'll want to make the best use of your time (see Figure 4). To study and learn successfully try to master these three main areas relating to time management.

- Getting organised and finding appropriate places to study.
- Planning and prioritising on an ongoing basis.
- Dealing with distractions.

## 5.1 Getting organised and finding places to study

You need somewhere to study and somewhere to keep your module materials, files and books. You'll also need access to a computer. It's not always possible to have a room to yourself that's always available.

- You could regularly use the kitchen or dining room table.
- Boxes or bags can be used to store materials you're currently using to say, prepare for an assignment. A bag can even have its own

filing system and you can take it wherever you need to go – on the train to work, in the garden if you feel like some fresh air, or to the local library.



**Figure 4** Managing your time for learning

It can be good to use a particular study space regularly because when you go and sit there it becomes habitual to start studying. You can use this kind of established space for fairly long periods of study, but you could easily use other study places for shorter bursts of activity. You can achieve a lot in only 10–20 minutes.

- Listen to an audio recording in your car to review module material.
- Study in a waiting room before an appointment.

Think ahead about the study materials you'll need to have with you for these times, e.g. taking books or downloading materials to a mobile device in advance. Once you get in the habit of finding opportunities to study it becomes second nature.



Search the [Help Centre](#) to find out more about using audio for your studies.

You'll also need to find the places and times that work best for you. Perhaps your optimum study session is:

- in a quiet area without distraction, or with background noise or music
- in short bursts, or marathon sessions (but remember to take breaks)
- early morning, daytime, evenings or nights
- using a computer, or making handwritten notes
- walking about, or sitting with snacks and drinks.

Always try to:

- do the most difficult work when your concentration is strongest
- take regular breaks, perhaps every hour
- be flexible and reflect on whether your study pattern is successful – for example, if you're getting less done in the evenings than you hoped, try something different, perhaps by studying in the early morning.

“ I’m really a morning person, but I might think about doing a bit before dinner though if I’m home at a reasonable time. It’s worth studying for half an hour or so at a time – over a week it adds up. ”

Being organised isn’t necessarily about being tidy – it’s about having a system that works for you. You want it to be easy to find things while you’re tackling difficult study tasks and trying to fit study in to your life.

## 5.2 Planning and prioritising

Identify your goals relating to your studies and then plan accordingly.

- Long-term goals – plan ahead so you can confidently set short-term goals. When are the assignment deadlines for my module? What are my commitments and plans for the year (e.g. a holiday)? Do I have events coming up at work that will cut in to my study time?
- Short-term goals – what shall I do with the study time I’ve put aside today? What’s important today for this week’s goals? How am I feeling? Would I be better off if I actively read a section of module material, or worked out the tasks I need to do to complete my assignment?

### Long-term goals

You could create a schedule that includes all your commitments relating to study, your work and personal or social life. A wall planner can be effective so you can see the big picture.

Make sure you are very familiar with your module when you’re thinking about long-term goals.

- What’s required to pass the module?
- When are the assignment cut-off dates?

- What are the learning outcomes?
- How much time do you need to allocate to study?

### Short-term goals

Think about your short-term goals, such as completing an assignment. You can use a more detailed plan or timetable to break down an activity into more manageable chunks, which you can tackle in the study sessions you have available. This schedule might be for the next week or few weeks. Put your plan where you can easily see it – and try to keep to it (see Figure 5).

Consider using incentives and rewards to help you to:

- motivate yourself to get started on a particular study task
- stick to your study schedule
- achieve your short-term goals.

What do you really like doing? Promise yourself a relaxing swim, lunch with a friend or time for your favourite TV programme if, for example, you:

- do at least two hours of study one day
- keep to your schedule
- send your assignment in on time.

Rewards help you stick to your plans, but you may still need to revise schedules from time to time. Sometimes certain bits of a module just take longer than you expected so you'll need to tweak your schedule, but you'll find that with practice you'll get better at estimating how long particular study tasks will take you.

“ I now make sure that whatever I'm working on I give myself a reward after forty-five minutes. It's something to look forward to and it keeps me going. I might only stop for about two or three minutes and other times I take up to fifteen minutes – it depends how I feel. It's made a tremendous difference. ”

Weekly schedules or timetables can help you to see how much time you have available to study, as you can block out times when you'll be working or spending time with the family for example. You may need to reorganise how you use your time to fit sufficient study hours into your week.

Target	What I need to do	With help from	Target date	Revised date	Date completed
Find out what the text TMA is about	Read the question and student advice	Bob – self-help group tutor at tutorial	April 12		April 12
Gather material for both parts of essay	Go through my notes extracting relevant bits  Check back through module unit and margin notes in case there is anything to add	TV programme might be useful	April 13		April 13
Produce and essay plan for each part	Put the points in order	Discussing key points with Bob	April 13		April 13
Produce first draft of both parts	Put my notes in some sort of order with an introduction and conclusion		April 13	April 14	April 14
Produce final draft of part 1	Edit to make sure that all the points are relevant; proof read for spelling and grammar 'blips'	Self-help group meeting at pub	April 14	April 15	April 15
Produce final draft of part 2	As above	As above	April 16	April 17	April 17
Meet the TMA deadline: April 21	Have final read through (just in case!) and post to tutor	April 18	April 19	April 19	

**Figure 5** Example time plan

Use daily or weekly 'to-do' lists to help you to plan and prioritise. Lists help to clear your mind and clarify what's really important for your studies, and they can also help you make a commitment to

yourself that you'll do what you have planned and listed. It can be satisfying to tick off the tasks you've completed on a list.

Planning doesn't guarantee that everything will get done or that deadlines will be met, but the process of making a plan helps you focus on where your priorities lie and gives direction and purpose to your study.

### Using action plans

An action plan can help you to identify what you want to achieve in the long term, and think through the steps you need to take in the short term to achieve this, making it easier to realise your goals. Your action plan could include these elements (see Figure 6).

- Goal
- What?
- How?
- Resources?
- When?

An action plan can be just a list of things to do, a chart giving deadlines, a diagram showing how the various parts of your plan interact, or a set of sticky notes on a sheet of card that you move around when each task is done. If you break down the overall task into a series of smaller targets, you can chart your progress in more detail. It's useful to have a way of recording your progress as well as a way of listing any sources of help that you need.



Search the [Help Centre](#) to find out more about managing your time effectively.

## 5.3 Distractions and procrastination

Sometimes it's difficult to make a start on your studies because you have distractions to deal with, and you may find that you put off a study task. Distractions can be very real (e.g. your child needs your attention), but they can also be displacement or replacement activities, or ways of procrastinating in disguise.

Instead of getting on with the reading for your assignment you find that all of a sudden you really need to sort out the garden shed, or spring clean a cupboard. We all experience this from time to time, but it's worth getting to know what kind of displacement activities you tend to engage in – you'll learn to recognise and deal with them so that you can get down to your important study tasks.

My Goal	
What?	Need to do 60 points per year Allocated realistic time for study (i.e. 12 hours per week)
How?	Do breakdown of typical week Note best and worst times of the day for study Timetable in 12 hours using as much 'best time' as possible Think about which study tasks I might tackle during 'difficult' times, e.g. watching module videos
Resources?	Tom, my line manager – negotiate some study leave and/or flexible working hours Clare – to add key family commitments to timetable (e.g. parents' evenings) Parents – ask for help with children and garden
When?	Talk to Tom during my appraisal on 10 November Talk to Clare next weekend while children are at swimming lessons and do timetable Ask Mum and Dad over for a meal next week

**Figure 6** Example action plan

Deal with distractions by:

- setting realistic goals for your study session (e.g. “I’ll read this section, or work for 40 minutes before I make that coffee”)
- aiming to minimise real interruptions (e.g. putting on your answer phone, politely asking friends not to disturb you).

## Working under pressure

Some people say that they need the pressure of a deadline to get on with a (now urgent) study task, such as finally writing an assignment. If you do this, ask yourself whether this way of working is really effective – you could be putting yourself under unnecessary pressure. Although you might feel that you’re producing good-quality work like this, you might produce even better work under less stress. Try to stick to short-term deadlines for important study activities like completing an assignment by the cut-off date.

You might be getting sidetracked or putting off the task.

Sometimes the distraction relates to your studies – for example, you don’t feel ready to start writing your assignment because you think you need to spend more time reading or taking notes. Or sometimes you just feel too busy to devote time to it. You need to find ways to ensure that you can meet deadlines.

- You could ask others for help – what could you delegate?
- Try not to feel that you need to produce the perfect assignment or project.
- Avoid taking on too many commitments – learn to politely say ‘no’.
- Learn to prioritise your tasks.
- Do a deal with yourself – “Okay, I’ll go to the pub with my friend who’s just phoned, but this means that I’ll need to get up early on Sunday to study instead”.
- You may find that the task doesn’t take as long as you expected and you’ll feel much better for getting it out of the way.

In other words, it's worth looking to see if you (unintentionally) put important things off by doing something else. By recognising your own behaviour patterns you can prioritise and get down to your study tasks.



# 6

## IN CONCLUSION

As a student you'll develop study strategies that suit you and learn to recognise which study skills and techniques are valuable for particular tasks and challenges. You'll also find that reflecting on what works well in your studies will help you to develop as you try out different approaches and review their effectiveness.

During your studies you'll use some skills you already have (e.g. organisational and planning skills) and learn new ones, which you can use in other areas of your life (e.g. in paid or voluntary work). These include transferable or 'employability' skills such as initiative, problem solving and computer literacy.

Recognising when you need help and knowing where to go for it is important when you want to improve particular study skills. Sources of help may be your tutor or student support team.

You don't always have to study on your own. Use your online module forums and try to take part in any tutorials available on your module, either face-to-face or online, to keep in touch with other students and share ideas, techniques and tips. You can also connect with other students using social media, many students form support networks in this way.

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