Study Skills
How do you learn?

Learning how to study effectively is a skill. This guide should help to reaffirm techniques and knowledge you have learnt from previous study and, hopefully, provide new insights into learning and what is best for you.

People have different learning styles and different aids which help them to learn effectively, the most commonly recognised learning styles are:

**Auditory**: if you are an auditory learner you will prefer to learn by listening or speaking. You may find your learning is influenced by speaking out loud when you learn, discussing ideas with friends, or you are affected by background noise when you study.

**Visual**: if you are a visual learner you will learn best by seeing things. You may find you work best using diagrams and plans, colour coding your notes is very helpful and the things you can see around you help affect your learning.

**Physical**: if you are a physical learner you will learn best by touching, doing or moving. You could try talking to friends, separating arguments out into lists or moving around your study space to help you think or concentrate.

Most people use a combination of these techniques when they learn; this means there are certain generalisations which can be made about how it is best to learn which seem to work for most people. The following tips should help you to learn more effectively by recognising your own learning habits.

The question

Every assignment you undertake will be based on a particular question you need to answer. It may be a question you set yourself, a question your lecturer set, or one set by the awarding body, but you should use it as your key starting point. Read it carefully to make sure you understand exactly what you need to do. There may be some **direction words** in the question; these will tell you what type of answer you should be providing. However, they may not be words you have come across before so always check if you’re unsure what they mean.
Glossary of direction words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyse</th>
<th>Break up into parts; investigate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Look for similarities and differences between; perhaps reach a conclusion about which is preferable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>Bring out the differences between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticise</td>
<td>Assess the value of an idea or argument using informed opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define</td>
<td>Set down the meaning of a word or phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Give a detailed account of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Investigate or examine by argument; sift and debate; give reasons for and against; also examine the implications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiate</td>
<td>Indicate the differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Give your judgement about the merit of a theory or opinion; back your judgement by a discussion of evidence or reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>Look closely into</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Make clear; interpret and give an account, give reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explore</td>
<td>Examine thoroughly, consider from a variety of viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify</td>
<td>Recognise or distinguish as separate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate</td>
<td>Make clear and explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions; answer the main objections likely to be made to them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List/Outline</td>
<td>Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasising structure and arrangement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate</td>
<td>Show how things are connected to each other, and to what extent they are alike, or affect each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Present in a brief, clear form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarise</td>
<td>Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, omitting details and examples</td>
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</table>

Your environment

Create a comfortable space in which to learn by:

- **Limiting noise and distraction**, some people work best to music but try to ensure the music does not become your focus by keeping the volume low and the tempo reasonably slow
- Working in a **comfortable temperature**, make sure the room is not too hot or too cold
- Ensure your **seating is comfortable**, but not too comfortable! If you work lying down you’re likely to fall asleep!
- Make sure the **light in the room is good**; working in a gloomy space will strain your eyes and make you tired quickly
- **Eat regularly and drink plenty of water**, being hungry or thirsty will distract you from your work
- Take **regular breaks** and break work down into manageable chunks

Once you have ensured your learning environment is comfortable you can move on to starting your work. The first task you will want to undertake for any assignment is background reading.

When you are selecting your sources it is likely your lecturer will recommend titles to you, these should be your main points of reference but not the only sources you use. An easy way to find sources is by **forward and backward chaining**. When a source is written, the author will have attached a reference list or bibliography. The information in the reference can be used to backward chain to the resources the author used which may be relevant to your assignment. You can also use your source material to find more recent work in which it has been used as a reference, this is forward chaining.

**Reading for the assignment**

First, you will need to work out what you do know in relation to the question and what you don’t. You will need supporting arguments to provide evidence of your knowledge, and you will need to research further to fill in the gaps in your knowledge by carefully selecting your texts. To do this effectively there are two main points which must be considered:

- Resources should be **relevant** – the content must answer the question and not stray into areas which you do not need to study.
- Go back to the assignment title and consider how relevant they are.
- They should be **reliable** – academic sources are best as they can be checked to make sure the information is correct. It is OK to use other sources, such as newspapers, provided they are widely recognised as being factual. Some sources, particularly ones found online and in tabloid media, can be less reliable. Sites such as Wikipedia can be changed by anyone, and should be avoided as the information may not be accurate. More recent sources can also be more reliable than older ones as they are likely to include the most up-to-date information.

Always check the Learning Hubs first to see if we stock a copy of the source you’re looking for. The main Learning Hubs have a library stocked with books which have been chosen by College staff so you can be sure they are appropriate to use in your assignments. In addition, the Learning Hubs also have a range of **online resources** that are available for you to use. These resources can be accessed from home too; for more information, advice or guidance please ask staff at any of the College’s Learning Hubs.

Your Dundee College student card allows you to borrow 2 books at a time from **Abertay University Library**. If you would like to check to see if the books you want are available from Abertay, ask a Learning Hub Assistant to demonstrate the **integrated search function in the library catalogue**.

Remember you can also join Dundee Libraries ([http://www.leisureandculturedundee.com/library](http://www.leisureandculturedundee.com/library)) and they have a range of ebooks, audiobooks and textbooks that could help you with your studies, as well as providing
free internet access and wifi. It may also be possible to borrow books from other libraries. Bring details of books you would like to find to a Learning Hub for help.

After looking over the literature you should have an understanding of what is relevant to your assignment title and what is not, what you already know and what you do not. If you cannot decide whether you will need to read a text or not you need to more closely examine it, there are different ways of doing this.

**Ways of reading**

There are 3 main ways to read a text, they are:

**Scanning:** This means quickly looking over the material to pick out key pieces of information. You might want to do this to check for specifics before you commit to reading a text.

**Gist reading:** This is reading quickly to get a general idea of the themes. You might simply read the introduction, subheadings and conclusion to decide whether to read in more detail.

**Close reading:** This is reading a text carefully and making notes on the relevant points. You may do this for a number of reasons, to establish a background for your writing, to help understand the arguments more clearly or as a way into a new topic. This should be the main way in which you read the literature for your assignments, scanning and gist reading are not a substitute for reading thoroughly, they just help you to establish the relevance of a piece of work before you read it.

If you find yourself reading something that is not covering the main points of your title then stop reading it and move on. This means it is not as relevant as you may originally have thought it was. Don’t waste time reading things which are not strictly relevant to your assignment title, remember you need to answer the question if you want a good grade and irrelevant information will not help you do that.

Another handy hint is to order your reading. Once you know what you want to read, select texts in order of relevant materials, starting with 1 as the most relevant. This way, if you should run out of time, you can focus on the sources with the most relevant content as you get closer to your deadline.

**Reading hints and tips**

- Plan the **time** to read.

- Be clear and realistic about how much time you need to read something.

- **Find your ideal concentration time**, long enough to be meaningful but not so long that you lose concentration, for example 30 minutes reading, 10 minute break, 30 minutes reading. That would give you enough time to read a substantial amount without losing focus.

- Do not rush yourself! There is no ‘correct’ speed for reading so take your time and make sure you understand it properly.

- Try to **highlight notes** as you go along to help you pick out the key points at a later date.

- Make a note of all the information you need for a citation or bibliography as you go along -this will
make it easier when you come to this stage. Plus, it will also help you locate a specific point when you need it.

- Remember, you do not need to read a text from start to finish to use it in your work. You simply need to read the sections that are relevant to the question you are trying to answer or assignment you are trying to write.

If you follow the advice above you should find selecting and reading your materials is easier than you might have expected.

Once you have read your text/s you need to think about making notes. The most important aspect of reading and note making is that you understand the work well enough to write it in your own words. If you do not you could end up plagiarising and that could be enough to get you suspended, or even expelled, from College. In most instances plagiarism is unintentional and simply results from poor referencing practices which is why referencing is so important. Good referencing not only tells the reader where to find your sources, but also demonstrates your academic integrity.

**What is academic integrity?**

When you are writing an assignment for College you must ensure your work is truthful and ethical. This means that you can demonstrate you have sourced your work properly and are evidencing this well through appropriate and consistent referencing practices.

**Why is academic integrity important?**

Academic integrity helps to protect you from claims of plagiarism. It is important to note that plagiarism does not simply refer to the use of words in a piece of work; it also refers to the use of ideas. You may be able to use quotes and to paraphrase work but this does not demonstrate the learning process involved in producing the work, what you write must clearly be your own interpretation and understanding of what you have read.

**How can you demonstrate the learning process in your assignments?**

In order to demonstrate the learning process, you must be able to produce a coherent and well thought out piece of work. If you have learnt and understood the work you are using you should be able to reference quite easily as you will be able to distinguish your own ideas from those of others.

At this stage in your academic career you will not be expected to produce original ideas, but your work is expected to be unique insofar as it demonstrates that you have read, researched and selected your materials and explained them using your own words. It helps by showing that you have read around the subject area, assessed the available information for its relevance and validity, and used this information according to academic convention demonstrating how your own work has developed from reading that of others.

Being able to demonstrate the learning process is one example of good working practices.
What are good working practices?

There are certain things you can do to protect yourself from claims of plagiarism, these are known as good working practices and demonstrate your academic integrity. It is very important that your sources are well selected, if you use evidence that comes from well-known, reliable sources, your reader can be sure that the work you have produced is suitably referenced and is unlikely to have been plagiarised.

Websites tend to be less reliable sources of information than books or journals even if they are well known. For instance, Wikipedia is a very well-known website but it can be constantly modified by members of the public. This means that none of the content has to be verified making it an unsuitable source for academic work as the information is not necessarily credible and the sources of information are often untraceable. This means that if you use information from Wikipedia your work could be subject to claims of plagiarism.

If you are going to use internet resources you must ensure you have all of the necessary information to reference them in the same way that you would a book or journal, for further information please see the Referencing guide.

Another good working practice is to be very careful when working in a group. Collusion, or using the same work as another student, is briefly discussed in the Referencing guide but there are a few other things it is worthwhile knowing in relation to this. If your lecturer has given you permission to work in a group and write your assignment collectively then it is fine to do this.

However, if you have not explicitly been given permission to do so then you must ensure that you do not write your work together or even share notes, as this can result in your work being too similar in content. It is fine to discuss your ideas but not to tell one another what to write as this would not be your own work.

A further example of good practice is to take notes well. This does not mean simply taking extensive notes, it means putting what you have read into your own words as you go along, to ensure that you understand the ideas, and making sure you take a note of where the information came from, including all of the details you would need for a bibliographic reference.

If you follow these guidelines you should produce a well written piece of work which is unlikely to be suspected of plagiarism. Plagiarism is very easy to spot as there are usually stylistic changes in the language; your lecturers will be able to see this very easily. To learn more about plagiarism please see the Referencing guide available on the Hub Help Moodle page.

Making notes

When making notes the most important thing to do is make sure you don’t just copy down large chunks of text as this will not help you to learn.

You need to interpret what you are reading into your own words; this is an active way of learning and will help you to remember the information at a later date. It is also important to make sure your notes aren’t too brief or you won’t understand them when you come back to them. Wherever possible try to write in full sentences,
**abbreviations** can help some people but you must make sure they are clear and you **keep a note** of all the abbreviations you use in case you forget their meaning.

When you are deciding what to write down, just like when choosing your sources, you must select the most relevant information, that which directly answers the question. Do not duplicate information if you can avoid it, if more than one author is making the same point then simply note down the reference information and **link it to the first text you made notes from**.

That way when you come to use the information you can easily reference it to any relevant authors. If you find you are having difficulty separating out main points from minor ones, it means that you do not understand the text properly. Try re-reading it more slowly, thinking about what you are reading as you do. If this does not help move on to something else, refocusing may help you to better understand it when you come back to it later.

You must also ensure that you make it clear to yourself when writing your notes if something is a **direct quotation** by marking it out in some way – highlighting, using capital letters etc. and always putting them in **quotation marks**. However, remember that this is not the case in the final submission, aside from the quotation marks the words themselves should be presented in the same way as the rest of the assignment.

Try to **summarise** your notes at the end of a section. Do this by writing a paragraph summing up the main points in the text and take this further by writing down your own thoughts on what you have read. Do you agree? Or disagree? Why? Can you evidence your own thoughts with other work? This will help you to make conclusions and build arguments which you can use in your assignment.

### Note Formats

There are different ways of making notes which are helpful once you have written the information down and are beginning to examine it more closely in relation to answering your assignment title. What has been discussed previously was in relation to **taking linear notes**, writing down the important points in the sequence you read them.

For some people this is enough, for many others it is not. Your notes may be long and are unlikely to be ordered in a way that is usable in an essay so you need to think about how they fit together, making **links between different ideas** and **seeing connections in the work of different authors**.

It is important to find your own note making style but these are the most common ways in which people begin to break their notes down when planning an assignment:

#### Linear/bullet points

This type of note making can be very helpful when trying to order your material. You may find it helpful to simply reorder your notes in this way, or maybe what you have originally written is enough for you to formulate a clear plan of how you will answer the question:
France
- Food—Cheese, frog’s legs, red meat, snails, wine
- Politics—Socialist, Hollande, unitary semi-presidential government
- Tourism—EuroDisney, Eiffel Tower, cultural attractions

**Mind maps**
This is a good way to brainstorm what you already know about a topic or idea, this will aid you in sketching out an essay plan as you will be able to see where the best sequences of ideas fit:

![Mind map](image)

**Pattern/visual notes**
These types of notes can make it easier to remember the information as they display the arguments in a structured way showing the connections clearly. You must make sure that pattern/visual notes also include all of the relevant reference information and that you can clearly distinguish between your own ideas and quotes.
Using more than one format

This is the best way to use your notes, as the writing and rewriting helps you to remember the information more easily. For example, if you listed your notes in bullet points first and then created a mind map from the bullet points you would be working your notes in two different ways and this helps you retain information. Using different methods can help to clarify connections and ideas which you are finding difficult because it changes the way the notes appear on the page, it can change the way you think about what you are reading by making it easier to identify connections.

Reviewing and reworking your notes

There is evidence to suggest that students who look over their notes to refamiliarise themselves, clarify or adapt the ideas are often more successful learners. It is important to look closely at the assignment title and check through your notes to ensure you have all the information you need to answer the question and produce well informed and coherent arguments.

You can do this by reorganising your notes as previously mentioned, rewriting what you had worked on before to help strengthen your understanding or by reflecting on your notes. This reflection process is called critical analysis and will help you to improve your grade. Think about what you have read – how well was it written? Has it affected your point of view? How relevant to the wider debate is it? Do you think the argument is valid? This type of evaluation can help you to create an analytic argument and this is where you will gain the highest marks for your assignments, rather than for an argument which simply describes what you have read.
Essay Planning

By this point in your research you should have a sound understanding of all of the information you want to use which means you are ready to begin writing. Before you start to write you must remember that your writing has a purpose – to answer the question. This means that you need to plan out what you will be writing about and how you will structure your writing.

A typical essay has three main parts to its structure – the introduction, main body and conclusion. Each of these parts should contain specific information.

Introduction
- In your introduction you need to offer background information on the question
- You should write a brief sentence on the importance of the question, why does it need to be answered?
- You should define any terms which are specific to the subject area
- Introduce the main ideas you will be discussing throughout the essay

Main Body
- Your main body should include a number of paragraphs, each paragraph should introduce, explain and analyse an argument and/or a counter argument
- In each paragraph you need an introductory sentence to tell your reader what you intend to discuss
- Each paragraph should contain an explanation and assessment of the argument and/or counter argument
- Each paragraph should also contain examples, evidence and references to support the argument and/or counter argument
- Each paragraph should contain a concluding sentence which draws together what has been covered

Conclusion
- You need to summarise each of the points you have covered in the main body of your essay
- You should state your main conclusions based on the evidence you have presented
- You need to answer the question by linking your conclusion back to the essay title

You will often be given a word count which restricts the amount that you can write so your essay is neither too short, nor too long. However, even without a word count there are rough guidelines which you can follow to work out how much each section of your essay should be in relation to the whole.
Diamond Planning

Imagine your essay as a diamond, the introduction and conclusion filling the narrow points at both ends, and the main body filling the wide, central section. This represents the amount of your word count each section should make up.

The introduction should be roughly 10% of your word count, as should the conclusion. The main body should be roughly 80%, but we can break this down further into paragraphs. The main body should have a few paragraphs; if we use an essay with five paragraphs as an example this means that each paragraph would contain 16% of the word count.

For instance, if your essay has a 2000 word count then the section would look like this:

**Introduction** – 200 words  
**Main body** – 1600 words, with each paragraph – 320 words or 16%  
**Conclusion** – 200 words

It is important to remember that these are only rough guidelines and the specific break down of words can be more or less than those listed for a 2000 word essay, but your introduction and conclusion shouldn’t be too short or too long.

The diamond shape can also be applied to the individual paragraph in your essay as follows:

A brief, introductory sentence at roughly 10%  
An explanation, analysis and examples of the idea at roughly 80%  
A brief, concluding and linking sentence at roughly 10%

If you use this model it will help your essay to flow and have a coherent structure. You will lose marks if you do not show how your ideas link together and by introducing and linking them you will easily be able to do show the connections.
Proofreading and editing

Once your assignment is written you will need to **proofread** it to make sure it is ready to be submitted. This involves looking for **mistakes** and **gaps** in your argument. You will then want to **edit** any mistakes you have made, change anything you feel is **too weak** or add **anything you think is missing**. It is important you do this carefully, and you may want to do it two or three times before you feel confident that your work is ready for submission. There are certain things that it is worth looking for each time you proofread your work:

- **Use** **formal language**, try to avoid using ‘I’ in your sentences unless you are specifically being asked for your opinion
• It is important to **use your own style**, this will come naturally over time but it helps to distinguish your work from others and make it stand out

• Be **concise**, try to avoid using overlong sentences as this is wasting your word count and can be perceived as ‘waffle’

• Try to use signpost words to make your essay flow, phrases such as **firstly**, **in conclusion** and **for example** help your reader know exactly what you are saying and make the language you use flow more easily - if your work reads well that means you have written it well

• Remember to **reference properly** and include a full reference list and/or bibliography at the end of your work

Remember, proofreading and editing are not only important for your long term assignment but also an important part of the exam process. You should always leave yourself time at the end of an exam to go over your answers and check for mistakes, spelling errors and grammatical oversights.

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**Exams**

Completing a ‘**final exam**’, or summative assessment, at the end of your studies requires you to remember information from the whole course you’ve studied and use it to answer questions in an exam.

If you develop **good study skills** and adopt a **positive and organised approach to revision**, you will develop transferable skills you can use in further study, at work or at home.

**Revising little and often** is a good plan to ensure you revise enough and are well prepared. You will not need to remember everything in lots of detail, but having a structured plan of how you will answer the questions is a great place to start. A plan which contains **an overview and key points** of your studies will prepare you well and hopefully lead to successful results.

The two key skills to revision are **managing your time effectively** and **preparing carefully**.

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**Managing time**

If you get **organised early** and have a good idea of what you need to do, you have a better chance of passing your exams. To help you prepare, you should have a clear idea of how you will use your time. This should make sure you don’t forget to do anything, or run out of time to revise. Manage your time more easily by:

• Creating a **timetable of your exams, submission dates and assessments** - you can use your Student Planner or create one

• Remember to add your **personal commitments**, e.g. work timetable, to your timetable so you can study around them

• Making sure you **stick to** your study programme!
• Take **breaks** from studying – work in blocks of around an hour

• **Stay hydrated** with water and making sure you eat regularly

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**Preparation**

Your preparation for exams should begin as soon as you start your course. If you **take good notes in class, label** and **date** your notes and **file** them well, it is very easy to find what you need at revision time.

• **Listen carefully** in class as distractions will get in the way of your learning

• **Ask about anything you’re not sure about** – you don’t have to ask in class, you could email your lecturer or speak to them at the end of a class

• **Take notes** so you can refer to them later

• Remember to **note key dates** for submissions and exams

It’s **never too early** to start revising for an exam, the better prepared you are, the better you are likely to perform on the day. Make sure you regularly refer to your **timetable** to stop you from going off track. **Set goals for yourself** in relation to studying, like completing a section or topic per night.

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**Top tips for exams**

• **Leave time at the end of any exam to read over your work** – you’ll be amazed what you notice and can change or improve

• **Use past-papers** (some hard copies are available in the main Learning Hubs and you’ll find some at [http://www.sqa.org.uk/pastpapers/findpastpaper.htm](http://www.sqa.org.uk/pastpapers/findpastpaper.htm)) for practice and ask a lecturer to look over your work

• Make use of **SQA marking schemes** which are also available on the SQA website - they clearly explain what you need to do to pick up marks

• **Come to the main Learning Hub and use the study and revision guides available** for your subject – these will help you revise successfully.

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**Exam question types**

There are a variety of different question types. Be prepared for the style of questions you will be asked and refer to our answer tips.

**Essay question**

If you’re asked to write essay style answers in an exam it is a good idea to **prepare brief answers for a variety of questions** before the exam – your lecturer will sometimes guide you to the main subject areas that will be
covered. Always make sure to read the questions carefully and decide which one you know the most relevant information about so you can answer as fully as possible. Once you’ve selected your question, re-read it and refer to it throughout writing your answer. It is important that you answer the question explicitly in your essay. Sometimes markers like to see a brief plan or structure can help to organise your thoughts. Make sure you leave time to read over your answer at least once, and correct any mistakes you see. If you’re running out of time, try to write a brief sentence or two about the next part of your essay. You could also try using bullet points to summarise your arguments but only if you’re running out of time.

Multiple Choice

For multiple choice questions the correct answer is always on the page. You should read all the options carefully as multiple choice answers are often very similar so make sure you look at the wording carefully. Answer every question; the right answer is there so you have a % chance of choosing correctly so an educated guess may hit upon the correct answer.

Straight forward question and answer

Subjects like Biology, Geography and Maths will ask you to use your knowledge of the subject to answer direct, short answer questions. Where necessary remember to show your working, as you can pick up marks for the way you got to the answer even if the final answer is incorrect. The number of marks you can get for a question will reflect how much information you should give and therefore how much time you should spend on that question. Try to spend around minute on each mark – that will help you complete the paper in time. You should never leave a question blank because leaving it blank you will get no marks but if you make a reasonable, educated guess or explanation you may get some marks.

And finally...

This guide should have provided you with information you need to carry out your written assignments. The points covered should guide you to improve upon, and better understand the purpose of your work. However, what is provided in this guide should not be where you stop developing your academic skills. You can always take the time to improve what you already know and this will reflect in your grades. If you need any further information on study skills, or study skill support for your work, please feel free to speak to any member of Learning Hub staff - we are always happy to help!