

8 tips for studying effectively at University

Many students studying Higher Education contend with many complex issues in their daily lives. With so many forces often competing for students' attention, it can sometimes prove difficult for students to dedicate quality time to studying. The key to effective studying isn't cramming at the last minute or studying longer, but studying smarter! I have chosen to share my top 8 study tips that will hopefully help you develop effective and productive study habits.

1. How you approach studying matters

Too many students consider studying a necessary and tiresome task. You should learn to enjoy what you are studying and not think of it as a chore, but a worthwhile endeavour. Being in the right mind-set is important in order to help you study smarter. Sometimes you can't "force" yourself to be in the right mind-set, and it is during such times you should simply avoid studying. If you find yourself being distracted by a friend or impending coursework deadlines, then studying is going to be a frustrating and laborious exercise. You should either block out the distraction or come back to it when you're not focused by something else that is competing for your attention.

2. Find a study area that works for you

Many students make the mistake of studying in a place that promotes social interaction with their friends, such as the communal areas located on campus or in halls of residence. Such locations make concentrating difficult. The library can often be a good place to study however if you are prone to being easily distracted ensure you book a study carrel or quiet room. Studying in your residence can also prove rewarding, ideally if you have your own personal space. Finding an ideal study place is important because it's one you can reliably count on for the next few years.

3. Bring everything you need to your study location, not the things you don't!

When students find an ideal place to study, they often bring things they don't need. For instance, while it may seem ideal to type notes into a computer to refer back to later, computers can be powerful distractions for many students. Playing games, online gambling, using Facebook and Twitter and answering emails are all wonderful distractions that distract students from studying. So ask yourself whether you really need an iPad or laptop to take notes, or whether you can make do with the old-fashioned paper and pen or pencil?

4. Learn how to note - take effectively

Note taking is an important academic task that helps you to remember what you have learnt and helps you to review materials for re-use in revision and assignments. It is important that you are critical when note taking and that you only write or draw what you will need later on, and that you record the information in a format that is easy to understand. When taking notes you might like to try different study techniques such as the SQ3R approach or you might like to use a more visual approach such as a spray diagram. Most importantly, after taking effective notes, it is important to organise and store your notes effectively. Effective note taking should reduce your study time, should increase your retention of knowledge, and should provide you with a summarised list of resources for your future projects.

5. Devise a study schedule you can stick to

Too many students treat studying as the thing to do when exams are on the horizon, or when they have some spare time. But if you schedule study time just as your class time is scheduled, you'll find it becomes much less of a hassle in the long run. Instead of last-minute cramming sessions, you'll be better prepared because you haven't put off all the studying into one 12-hour marathon. Spending 30 or 60 minutes every day is a lot easier and will allow you to actually digest more of the material. The frequency isn't as important as actually studying on a regular basis. Even if you spend a couple of hours a week reading through your lecture notes it's better than waiting until the first exam in a massive cram session.

6. Take breaks (and rewards!)

Because so many students consider studying a chore or laborious task, it can be human nature to avoid it. If, however, you find rewards to help reinforce what you're doing, you may be pleasantly surprised by the change you may find in your attitude over time. Rewards start by reducing study time into manageable components. Studying for 4 hours at a time with no breaks is not realistic or fun for most people. Studying for 1 hour, and then taking a 5 minute break and grabbing a snack is usually more sustainable and enjoyable. Divide study time into segments that make sense and work for you. If you have to digest a whole textbook chapter, find sections in the chapter and commit to reading and taking notes on one section at a time. Maybe you only do one section in a sitting, maybe you do two. Find the limits that seem to work for you.

7. Keep healthy and balanced

It's hard to achieve an appropriate work / life balance whilst studying at university. However, the more balance you seek out in your life, the easier being successful and achieving targets become. If you spend all of your time focusing on your social life or academic life, it can easily become unbalanced and counterproductive. When you're out of balance, the things you're not focusing on, such as studying or revising become that much harder. It is important to achieve a successful work / life balance by not spending all of your time studying or socialising; it is important to dedicate quality time to study, but is equally as important to have friends, keep in touch with your family, and find interests outside of school that you can pursue and enjoy. Finding balance isn't really something that can be taught, it's something that comes with experience and simply living. You can work to try and keep your health and body balanced, by doing what you already know – exercise regularly and eat right.

8. Strive to become engaged as opposed to merely involved in class

While taking good notes and listening in class is a positive start, it is even more important to engage with the material that is being disseminated in class. It can be very easy for students to arrive at a lecture or tutorial with all the right equipment and listen to the information being communicated by the lecturer, but never offer an opinion, interact with fellow peers or ask stimulating questions. This behaviour ensures only class involvement as opposed to class engagement. Students must realise that to achieve high academic results they must be more than involved in their learning and immerse themselves in all educational related activities both in and out of class to help achieve higher academic results. Such activities might involve making frequent trips to the library, meeting with lecturers in office hours, taking the time to locate and read journals and perhaps attend conferences.