



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES
ST. AUGUSTINE, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO, WEST INDIES
HEALTH SERVICE UNIT

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PATIENT INFORMATION HANDOUT

Basic Study Methods

(Nick Halpin)

There is a great deal that you can do to become more proficient in your methods of work, regardless of your present standards. You have a choice: you can achieve more either through a process of trial and error, or by making a deliberate attempt to modify your study habits. This leaflet assumes that you are interested in changing your methods of work. Bear in mind that for any improvement to occur, the essential ingredients will be a systematic approach, patience and perseverance.

Effective study demands hard work no matter how able you may be.

The Organisation of Work

HOURS PER WEEK The average undergraduate puts in 30-40 hours of work each week during term time. This includes formal work such as lectures, practicals, tutorials etc. and informal work in the library, in his/her room etc. If you work less than 30 hours per week, you are likely to jeopardise your studies through lack of preparation. If you work more than 50 hours per week, you are likely to end up overtired and ineffective with no spare energy for leisure activities.

MENTAL STAMINA. Mental stamina depends on personality, constitution and training. Some people can work long hours because they have developed the habit over many years. Mental stamina has much in common with physical stamina: it depends on effort and practice. If you don't think you are working hard enough, try increasing your hours of work gradually over a period of weeks. There is no instant method that will transform you into the 'bionic student'!

FLEXIBILITY. Depending on course requirements and personality, some find it easy to settle into a routine. Others find that a schedule of regular study periods is a straitjacket. If you find that working at set hours is not practical because of competing demands on your time, try adopting a flexible timetable, where you set out to achieve a set number of hours' study each week, based on varying amounts each day.

EFFECTIVE WORK. If you are working a reasonable number of hours each week, the next thing to consider is what proportion is spent in effective work. Is your concentration generally good? Are there periods when daydreaming, sluggishness, overtiredness or a lack of purpose result in you being less efficient? One way to become more effective is to record carefully what you actually do: Are you doing important work when you are actually quite exhausted? Do you work in cycles? Could you squeeze more work into the 0900-1700 period and release more time in the evenings for relaxation?

Could you plan your leisure more effectively? The more enjoyable your leisure time, the harder you will work to make way for it.

If you want to work hard, you have to play hard

REALISM. Be realistic about your goals. Don't be over-ambitious. Give yourself time to complete a particular piece of work. Be realistic about your limitations. There are limits to how much effective work you can do each day: Don't overdo it, at the expense of the next day. Establish regular breaks. Vary your tasks. A change will do you good. If you enjoy exercise, take it regularly and you will return to your work with more energy. Be realistic about distractions. If you know that you are likely to be distracted, your concentration will be adversely affected from the start. Establish the kind of surroundings that will help you study. Be assertive about your needs... put a sign outside your door "*I am working. Please don't disturb me.*"

MONITOR YOUR WORK. Use the ***Weekly Diary Sheets*** and the ***Term Log Sheets***, available from the College shops.

The more you monitor your work accurately, the more you control it.

They will help you to record what actually happens. Make them work for you. Don't file them away. Pin them up. They will remind you of how you worked last week, and also track your current efforts.

Reading

BE REALISTIC. Good literature may demand 2, 3 or 4 readings. Ideas that are new to you take time to assimilate. Difficult text may slow down your reading and note-taking to about 2-3 pages per hour. If you misjudge the required effort, if you fail to budget sufficient time, then strong feelings of frustration can develop that have more to do with your lack of realism about the task in hand than with the book itself.

BE SYSTEMATIC. If you come across a difficult/important section, be systematic in your approach. Above all, don't just read it several times, in the hope that it will somehow sink in and become clear. Get an overview of the passage/chapter (possibly from the introduction/concluding chapters, or from another book). Having established a framework, note the main themes and key issues. Jot down any questions or points causing difficulty, and check them with a tutor. Try to recall the gist of the argument, and how the material was structured.

BE ADAPTABLE. Just as some reading is going to make heavy demands on your time and concentration, on other occasions the main purpose of your reading may not be so exhaustive: e.g. you simply need to gain a quick overview of a topic. Here it may be more relevant to **scan, search** and **skim**. To pick out the information, you need to look for key points and summaries. You may even decide to start with the concluding chapter. At all costs when looking for information, avoid/unlearn the zombie habit of reading automatically from page one to the end!

BE ACTIVE. Anyone can prop their eyelids open and stare at a book. What matters is not the sausage machine approach - i.e. how much you can read - but how much you are interacting with the author's approach to the topic. What do you want to know about the subject? Is the author providing you with the information you need? At times you need to be critical: Is the author's treatment of the topics of sufficient depth? Is the material arranged with clarity/concision? If a textbook proves to be unsatisfactory, look for a good substitute.

BE PRUDENT. You may never see the book again. Don't rely on being able to borrow it a second time. Make full use of it while you have it.

Taking Notes

SIMPLICITY. Aim for simple, clear notes, rather than elaborate detail. Notes are not meant to be objects of beauty. It's a waste of time to write up fair copies at the end of the day. Good note-taking enables you to locate accurate information with the minimum of fuss.

LAYOUT. Good layout helps to identify the line of argument and the key points, by providing a consistent framework of headings, sub-headings, etc. To indicate the relative importance of topics, CAPITALS, underlining, **highlighting** have their uses. To indicate interconnections, diagrams, arrows, asterisks and boxes are helpful. Revision and rereading is made much easier by leaving plenty of space for later additions, and by writing on one side only. Don't ignore the 'mind map' approach developed by Tony Buzan.

SHORTHAND. Develop a list of abbreviations for terms/expressions that occur frequently.

STORAGE. **Never** carry all your notes around. Keep them in a folder/file in your room, and add to them each day. If you lose a day's notes, they can be replaced. When a year's work goes missing, it's not so easy!

REVISION. Use your notes **actively**. **Do something with them!** Don't just reread them: It's not an effective use of your valuable time. Index them. Sort them out carefully. Try reading through a section, then putting your notes to one side, and writing down the main points from memory. Don't be reluctant to seek clarification/advice from friends or tutors.

Essay Writing

THINKING. Thinking about the essay title is crucial to the success of your work. Before you look at the reference material, put down your thoughts and questions.

Get a large sheet of paper. Put the title in a box in the middle. Take 40 minutes and put down any thoughts or questions inspired by the title. Jot them down quickly. Don't worry about being tidy or logical or putting them in linear sequence. Just capture your thoughts as you formulate them. Your reference reading will now become a personal search for information, rather than just providing you with an uncritical collection of notes.

What finally counts in your essay, once you have researched the issues and carefully established the context, is the quality and integrity of your own judgement, i.e. what you personally think about a topic. Ask questions and let your essay reflect the answers that you find. See the leaflet entitled *First aid for Essay Writing*.

FORMAT. Most undergraduate essays in 1st year are about 1,000 - 1,500 words in length, and require about 6 sides of A4 paper. A typical essay will need 10-15 hours' work from start to finish. Try to organise it in terms of one main point per paragraph. 8-10 paragraphs should suffice to outline an argument. Allow at least one hour per side of A4 when you reach the writing stage. In later years essays will demand 2-3 times as much time/effort.

ARGUMENT/IDEAS. Make sure that your own thoughts carry the weight of the argument. Identify your questions and organise your argument into a single theme that proceeds logically to deal with the questions. Always reinforce general observations with specific data. Illustrate your argument with a moderate number of examples. Use source material to support your own ideas. Be sparing with quotations.

STYLE. It is not necessary to aim for a flowery, impressive style. Clarity, precision and a concern to communicate will give your writing both style and coherence.

PRESENTATION. Always read through your work before handing it in. If possible write several drafts: Good writing invariably means rewriting. If the final copy looks messy, your work is unfinished and not ready for your reader.

Revision

When should you revise? Whenever possible. Revision is not a ritual to be preserved for set occasions. To be effective it should be part of your work each week. In your reading, in your notes and in your practical work aim for the kind of understanding and clarity that will assist your revision.

Be careful before exams to allocate sufficient time to revision: e.g. four sides of notes on a single lecture may require 30-45 minutes of revision, and a course of lectures may demand in excess of 10-12 hours.

Plan a revision timetable. Remember: **failure to plan is planning to fail.**

Look at past papers, and practise answering some of the questions. If you are in any doubt, check your information with a tutor.

Discuss your revision with friends in a positive, constructive manner, in order to reduce the number of blindspots where you think you know the answer, but in fact you don't.

Difficulties

STRESS. A great deal of activity is compressed into the university term. It's important to keep the competing pressures under constant review. If they prevent you from meeting work deadlines, do something **QUICKLY** about the situation. Seek advice from your tutors, adviser of study or the Counselling Service.

OVERTIREDNESS. Your reserves of mental/emotional energy tend to gradually diminish during the term. To avoid getting overtired, pace yourself carefully, particularly if there are important exams ahead of you.

POOR CONCENTRATION. This is a stress reaction due mainly to overtiredness and anxiety. If the condition persists, symptoms of depression can develop. Be constructive: discuss it with a member of staff, reschedule your deadlines if possible, set modest daily targets with frequent breaks, establish a clear division between work and leisure, and make plans to have a complete day away from the University.

EFFECTS OF ILLNESS. If you are recovering from illness, pace yourself carefully. Don't be over-ambitious and try to catch up too quickly on the backlog of work. Consult your tutors to reschedule immediate commitments.

GAPS IN YOUR KNOWLEDGE. If your grasp of a topic is sketchy, don't leave it in the hope that 'it will sort itself out'. It won't! See your tutors. If necessary refer to alternative textbooks, overviews, even A level/Highers texts etc. Consult with the department about extra tuition, e.g. by a postgraduate.

EXAM ANXIETY. If you are badly affected by this, make an appointment with the Counselling Service or your GP. - If possible, well before your next diet of exams. There are now several effective and reliable methods of controlling exam anxiety.

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