

Study!

A guide to effective
study, revision and
examination techniques

Robert Barrass



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at Sunderland Polytechnic*

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Preface

Although students of all subjects are judged by their performance in course work and examinations, they may be given little or no advice on study, revision or examination techniques. Most tutors give advice only when they see that it is necessary; and many students feel that they have to do so much studying that they have no time for reading books about it. They prefer to rely on their common sense, to use methods of learning that contributed to their success as pupils at school, and to learn from their own mistakes – if these are recognized. Thus, they pick up advice about study, here and there, as they go along.

Left to themselves many students learn to study effectively, but they may take several months to adjust to the differences between school and college. They continue to gather ideas and to improve their study skills throughout their student life, and so are much better students by the end of their course than they were at the beginning. However, many students still have much to learn about study, revision and examination techniques at the end of their course. It is as if they had come to the end of the game and were still learning the rules. They may then feel, even if they have worked very hard, that they have not achieved their full potential.

Students who know that they are working hard, yet feel that they are not doing as well as they could either in course work or examinations, are likely to benefit most from straightforward advice – because they know that they need help. However, students who are satisfied with their progress can also be helped to do even better work, just as talented athletes can improve their performance when well coached.

It would obviously be best, therefore, in their first few weeks at

college, if all students were to consider how to use their study and leisure time. Learning to work effectively (to think, understand, select, organize, and explain or remember) would help them not only at college but also in any career.

The advice in this guide is to help students to think about the way they work and, where necessary, to improve their study, revision and examination techniques. They may read it chapter by chapter (rather than at one sitting) during the first weeks of a course, and then try the techniques recommended. Afterwards they may refer to appropriate chapters, for advice on particular points, throughout their course.

This book may also be used by lecturers and tutors, as an aid to counselling and as a text for a course in study skills. Suggestions for class work are listed in the Index after the entry *exercises and discussion topics*.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Because the following terms have different meanings in different countries, and even in different colleges in one country, they are defined here.

Assessor or marker: one who assesses the merit of a work and assigns a grade or mark.

Teachers: all people who teach in a school or college.

School or high school: an institution where *pupils*, up to about the age of eighteen, take introductory courses.

College: an institution (college, polytechnic or university) at which *students* take advanced courses.

Term: a period at college between vacations (one third of academic year); compare with *semester* (half academic year).

Class: any organized period of instruction.

Lecturers and tutors: people who give lectures and tutorials in a college (although many of them have titles such as professor and doctor).

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Sunderland Polytechnic
10 December 1983

Robert Barrass

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1

Study

Different people study effectively in different ways, so no one can tell you how to study, but knowing about ways of working that others have found useful should help you to improve your own study skills. You haven't time to learn only by experience, by making and correcting mistakes.

Obviously, the best time to review your study, revision and examination techniques is at the beginning of your course. You are likely to find that the techniques used at school (where you were taught) are not good enough at college (where it is up to you to learn), and you will want to do as well as possible from the start of your course.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME A STUDENT?

Whatever your reason for coming to college, make the most of this opportunity to participate in college life, to develop your personality, to undertake more demanding studies of subjects in which you are already interested, to develop your ability to think, and to take examinations which will provide a challenge and a measure of your achievement.

Many students who withdraw from a course early, or fail in their examinations, do so because they are not well motivated. Think carefully, therefore, before deciding upon the kind of course to take (see Appendix A) and before deciding which subjects to study in each

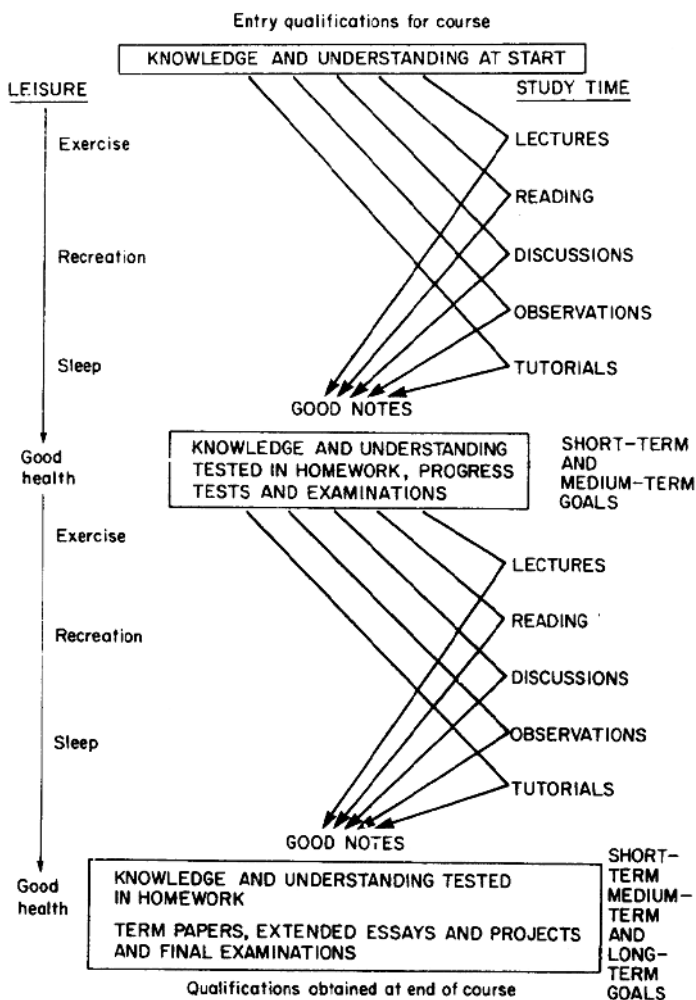


Fig. 1.1 Charting your path through a college course.

year of your course. Then remember that you are taking this course and studying these subjects because you chose to do so.

To maintain your sense of purpose it is best to have clear long- and short-term goals (see Fig. 1.1). For example:

Long term: to progress in a particular career; to achieve grades at the end of your course that are a true reflection of your ability.

Short term: to devote enough time to recreation including your social life; to attend all classes; to complete homework on time; to do your best work.

Immediate: to recognize things that need your attention; to arrange these tasks in order of priority; and then to concentrate on one task at a time.

ARE ALL YOUR SUBJECTS INTERESTING?

You will probably find some subjects interesting from the start, but others may not immediately seem relevant to your main subjects. Consider why these are part of your course. Recognize their importance to you; appreciate their relevance to everyday life or to different careers. Try to relate them to things in which you are already

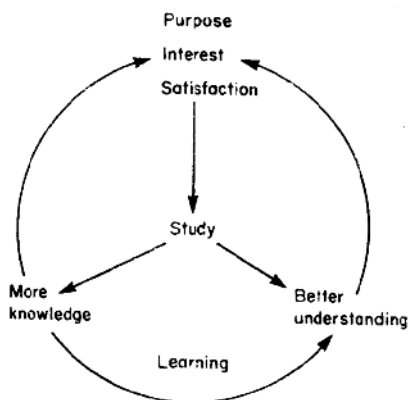


Fig. 1.2 Links between interest, effort, knowledge and understanding.

interested, and remember that they probably do provide a foundation for more advanced work in which you intend to specialize at college or afterwards.

Most people encounter some difficulties when they start a new subject. For example, it may be necessary to learn new words and their meaning. You can develop a positive approach to your studies, in any subject, by being determined to master its special language and other fundamentals. One way or another, making an effort to learn about and understand a subject is your first step towards success in the subject.

You can develop your interest by devoting more time to a subject rather than less. If the lecturer does not capture your interest, look at relevant parts of your textbook which may provide a different approach. If you find your textbook hard-going, look at other



WHAT SHALL I DO NEXT ?

Fig. 1.3 Let your friends know when you will be studying — so that you will not be disturbed at these times.

books: you should be able to find one that is easier to understand and yet suited to your needs. If you still cannot understand anything, ask your tutor for help (see p. 11).

Studying a subject is rather like fitting pieces into a jig-saw puzzle. It is easier to concentrate if you are interested, and as your interest grows you become more and more engrossed. The more you learn, the more you see the subject as a whole and the greater your understanding (see Fig. 1.2). Mastering something that you at first found difficult also boosts your self-confidence in your ability to learn.

Pleasure in study comes from acquiring knowledge, from widening your experience, from developing your ability to solve problems or make judgements, and from your deeper understanding of, for example, works of literature or art, or of people, or of the world. Pleasure also comes from the better results achieved in course work and examinations.

DO YOU STUDY EFFECTIVELY?

Adopting effective study, revision and examination techniques is largely a matter of common sense: if someone suggests possible courses of action it is usually easy to decide which is likely to be the most effective. For example:

1. Do you sit trying to study but feel, after several hours (see Fig. 1.3) that you have not achieved very much? Do you devote most time to the subjects in which most course work is set? Do you spend most time on your favourite subjects? Or do you work to a time-table, studying all subjects but spending most time (as suggested in this chapter) on those that most need your attention?
2. Do you think that being a good student is simply a matter of knowing how to study and how to communicate your knowledge and understanding? Or do you agree that it is just as important to look after yourself (see Chapter 2), and have a good social life (see Chapter 3), if you are to do your best work?

Study may be compared with a game: your purpose is not only to master your subjects but also to score points in course work and examinations. As in playing any game, the first step is to know the rules (see Fig. 1.4).

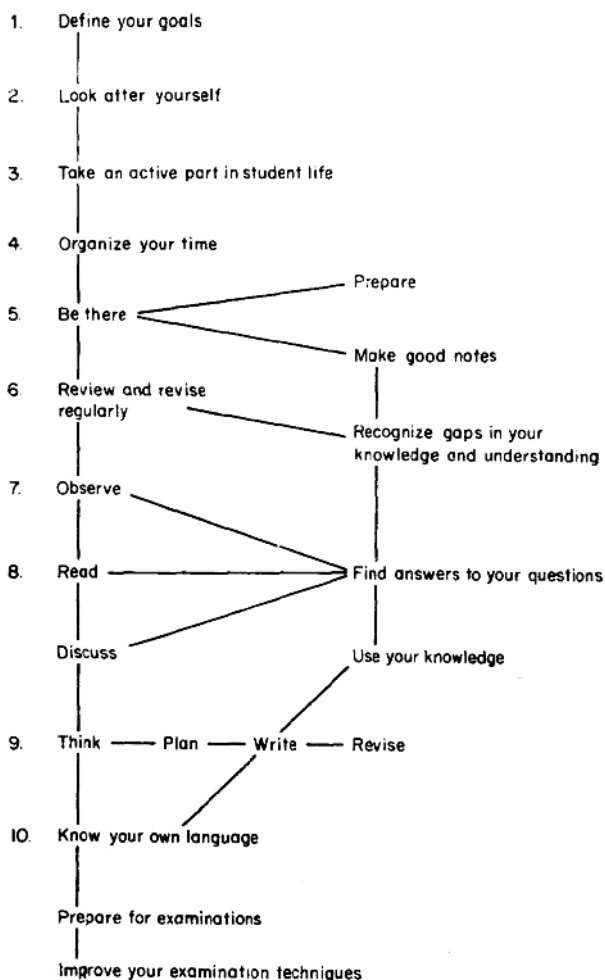


Fig. 1.4 Basic rules for the study game.

Look after yourself

At college you make a fresh start, with different people and in unfamiliar surroundings. The methods of instruction are different and you will need to adopt new techniques that help you to think, to learn and to communicate your knowledge. Most students look forward to making this break from school to college, and enjoy the new experiences that provide both challenges and opportunities.

However, life between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one, when most scholars begin to think of themselves as students, is also a period of transition from adolescent to adult. At this time many students leave home and assume more responsibility for their own actions: there is a change from being cared for to caring for oneself.

LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Deciding where to live

Most colleges provide a good working environment. To study most effectively, good living accommodation is also necessary, preferably with a comfortable room in which you can relax by yourself, when you wish to do so, or study without distractions (see p. 34).

It is probably best to live in college accommodation, with other students, at least for your first year at college. This increases your opportunities to make friends with students who are studying different subjects – and so to broaden your interests. In this first year you will also get to know about other kinds of accommodation that may

be available, and can consider their advantages and disadvantages.

Wherever you live, you will need a place in which to study effectively – without spending too much time or money on travel. Also, do not allow yourself to be cut off from the opportunities for recreation and friendship which college life provides.

The part-time student, or the student who attends a local college, will probably live at home and have no accommodation problems. However, changes in living arrangements may be needed. It is not possible to work effectively in a room shared with other people who are doing different things (such as talking, listening to the radio or television, or playing games). A student living at home requires the encouragement and support of other members of the family. The same applies if two or three students share a room in college accommodation. The minimum requirement is appropriate conditions (see p. 35) during the hours that must be devoted to private study (see pp. 25–30).

If you cannot go into another room to study when other people are at home, try to fit as much as possible of your study time into your timetable (see p. 24) so that you can study in the reading room of a local library or in the college library. Then study at home at times when you expect other people to be out of the house or busy doing other things in other rooms.

Looking after your money

Mature students who have saved whilst employed, so that they could attend college full-time, or who have to work part-time so that they can attend college full-time, will have experience in handling money and are unlikely to need advice. However, some students may find themselves with a large amount of money of their own for the first time.

It is best to put all this money in an account in which it will earn as much interest as possible, but from which withdrawals can be made either immediately or at short notice. Estimate how much you must spend during the term (e.g. for accommodation, food, clothing and fuel, tuition and examination fees, transport, and books and stationery). Deduct your estimated termly expenditure from your termly income, so that you have an idea of how much you could afford to spend on other things. You can then withdraw a fixed amount each week – if you need it.