

Study Skills in English

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To the student

This book is for students who have come to Britain, or are shortly about to do so, to study at a college or university.

You will probably find the experience of studying in Britain both enjoyable and rewarding, but you may also find some problems – especially at the beginning of your studies. Some of these problems will be general to all students, and some will be particular to you because you are a foreigner and not a native speaker of English. These problems can be overcome, but they can be very daunting at the beginning.

This book is intended to help you overcome at least some of the difficulties involved in studying in English. In particular, it is designed to answer these questions:

How can I read efficiently?

In your studies you will probably have quite a lot of reading to do. You will want to get it done as quickly and efficiently as possible: after all, you don't have an unlimited amount of time. This topic is covered in unit 2.

What is the best method of taking notes?

Partly this is a personal thing, but there are also some new techniques which have been found useful. In unit 3 you will get a chance to practise these.

How should I prepare myself for seminars and tutorials?

More and more teaching is being done in small groups. This can be a more effective method of learning than the big lecture, but only if the members of the group bring the right attitudes to the small-group sessions, and know what these sessions can, and cannot, do. This topic is dealt with in unit 4.

How do I set about researching a major piece of written work? How do I organise and present it?

You will probably be asked to write an occasional long essay, or write up a major project. This usually involves doing some research, organising your material and presenting it to the best advantage. Since this area may make all the difference between passing and failing a course, three units are devoted to it (units 5, 6 and 7).

How should I prepare for examinations?

Usually passing an examination is simply a matter of hard work, but not always: sometimes good candidates do not do themselves full justice, because they neglect a basic aspect of examination strategy. Unit 8 discusses examination strategy, and also deals with certain general study problems that some students have.

In addition to this, unit 1 is designed to help you with some of the more personal and social aspects of being a student in Britain, which can be quite important.

If you work your way through this book, or through the parts of it that are most relevant to your needs, you should be well prepared to play your part in college or university life. You may even find yourself better prepared mentally to overcome your problems than other students who have not thought about, and practised, the skills which lead to successful study.

Unit 1 Organising your studies

There are some people who are natural students. They always do the right thing at the right time, as if by instinct. They are never late with their work, and are always well-prepared for any test that they have to undergo. Unfortunately, this kind of student is very rare. Most of us find ourselves in a state of panic and unpreparedness at some time or other, or even of deep despair of ever being successful in our studies. We think: 'If only I had . . .' – usually when it is too late! This is natural – perhaps even normal – but in most cases it is also avoidable; we recognise this fact when we say: 'If only I had . . .'. Now, at the beginning of your studies in Britain, is a good time to look at your life-style as a student, and ask yourself if it is helping you to succeed, or not.

To help you in this, you will find four self-assessment questionnaires printed below.

For the first three questionnaires you will see that there are three blank columns. Look at the questions and then put a tick ✓ in the 'Yes' or 'No' column, as appropriate. Leave the 'For attention' column blank for the time being.

1 College work

For attention

Yes No

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Have you got a clear idea in your own mind of the ways in which the course that you are doing will benefit you? | | ✓ |
| 2 | In general, do you find the subjects that you are doing interesting and stimulating? | ✓ | |
| 3 | If you had problems with a certain subject, would you discuss them with your tutor? | | ✓ |
| 4 | Do you miss classes from time to time? | | ✓ |
| 5 | Are you often late for classes? | | ✓ |
| 6 | Do you feel that the amount of work you have to do is too much for you? | ✓ | |
| 7 | Do you hand in work on time? | | ✓ |

| | | |
|----|---|---|
| 8 | Do you have a system for doing the work that you are given? | ✓ |
| 9 | Do you have a system for keeping notes, handouts etc on the same subject together? | ✓ |
| 10 | Do you take outline notes of lectures, discussions, important texts etc? | ✓ |
| 11 | Do you contribute to tutorial discussions? | ✓ |
| 12 | Do you have any kind of cataloguing system for keeping track of the books you read? | ✓ |

2 Private study

For attention

Yes No

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| 1 | Do you have a room where you can study privately? | ✓ |
| 2 | Is your private place of study a) properly heated? b) properly lit? (If you have answered 'No' to question 1, leave these blank.) | |
| 3 | Do you have access to a library or reading room where you can work during your free time? | ✓ |
| 4 | Do you know the opening and closing times of your college/university library? | ✓ |
| 5 | Do you know how the library is organised? | ✓ |
| 6 | Do you know how many hours a week you spend a) in classes? b) on private study? c) on recreation? | |
| 7 | Have you made a plan of the number of hours per week you will have to spend on a) writing essays b) revision? c) other kinds of private study (e.g. reading)? | ✓ |

3 General way of life

For attention

Yes No

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Do you have a hobby or recreation which takes your mind off your studies for a while? | ✓ | |
| 2 | Do you take part in sport or take other regular exercise? | ✓ | |
| 3 | Do you belong to any college/university clubs or societies? | | ✓ |
| 4 | Do you get enough sleep (i.e. 7-8 hours per night)? | ✓ | |
| 5 | Do you eat a proper balanced diet (especially important if you are looking after yourself)? | ✓ | |
| 6 | Do you make lists of things that you have to do, and cross them off each day? | ✓ | |
| 7 | Have you got a small notebook in which you can jot down ideas, book references and so on? | ✓ | |

4 Special problems

The problems which we have been looking at apply to all students. There are also other problems which may affect you as a foreign student more severely. This section gives you the opportunity to think about them, and perhaps discuss them. Write down your comments.

- 1 Do you find it difficult to relate to British students, or to British people generally?
- 2 (Especially for private, i.e. unsponsored, students): Do you have financial problems in 'making ends meet'?
- 3 Do you find it difficult to get used to British food?
- 4 Do you suffer a lot from the cold weather?
- 5 Do you find difficulty in understanding the books that you have to read?
- 6 Do you find that it takes you a long time to read books in English?
- 7 Do you have difficulty in following discussion in tutorials etc?
- 8 Are you conscious of any problems in writing English?
- 9 Have you got
 - a) a good dictionary?
 - b) a good reference grammar of English?

Now compare your answers with those of the average successful student given in the Appendix (p. 191). As you check each questionnaire, put a large X in the space on the left-hand side ('For attention') where your answer is different.

Go over the items labelled X. These items show areas of weakness in you as a student. Some of the weaknesses will be less important than others. For example, it is possible to do well in your studies even if you don't have a private place of study; lack of interest in a subject, however, may be a more serious matter.

When you have finished, discuss your areas of weakness, and also any comments you have written down in answer to questionnaire 4 'Special problems', with your tutor.

You may also find it useful to have a class discussion of some of the problem areas highlighted by these questionnaires, and any others that occur to you.

Need for a personal timetable

One of the things you should know is where your time goes. It is very easy to deceive yourself that you are working harder than you really are. To help you keep track of how you spend your time, you will find a blank timetable on p. 7 opposite, which you can copy to suit your own requirements.

There are two ways you can use the timetable:

- a) If you are very conscientious, you can keep an hour-by-hour 'diary' for a week of how you spend your time – travelling, attending classes, meals etc. This will probably be very interesting for you, and you may be surprised at the results.
- b) Most people, however, don't have the patience to keep an hour-by-hour account. If you feel this way, you can concentrate on 'study hours', i.e. the number of hours you spend doing all kinds of study (reading, writing essays, etc), outside the time actually spent in class. (You will find more information about 'study hours' in unit 8, pp. 173–4.) Shade in as accurately as you can the time spent on private study.

How you plan to spend your time

You can use a similar timetable to help you plan how you *intend* to spend your time. Again, you can either do this in detail, filling in times for recreation, classes, meals etc, or you can simply concentrate on study hours.

Be realistic – and be fair to yourself. Do not put down a study programme that you cannot hope to achieve. Leave time for recreation, cups of coffee with friends, reading that is not

Diary of a week

| | MONDAY | TUESDAY | WEDNESDAY | THURSDAY | FRIDAY | SATURDAY | SUNDAY | |
|----|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|----------|--------|----|
| 6 | | | | | | | | 6 |
| 7 | | | | | | | | 7 |
| 8 | | | | | | | | 8 |
| 9 | | | | | | | | 9 |
| 10 | | | | | | | | 10 |
| 11 | | | | | | | | 11 |
| 12 | | | | | | | | 12 |
| 1 | | | | | | | | 1 |
| 2 | | | | | | | | 2 |
| 3 | | | | | | | | 3 |
| 4 | | | | | | | | 4 |
| 5 | | | | | | | | 5 |
| 6 | | | | | | | | 6 |
| 7 | | | | | | | | 7 |
| 8 | | | | | | | | 8 |
| 9 | | | | | | | | 9 |
| 10 | | | | | | | | 10 |
| 11 | | | | | | | | 11 |
| 12 | | | | | | | | 12 |

connected with your studies and so on. Over the next week, see how far what you have planned fits in with what you are able to do. This should give you some idea of the time that you really have for study, and what you can reasonably expect to do. Discuss what you have discovered with your tutor.

The student's survival kit

This is a summary of the information you need to survive as a student! Note down the answers to the following questions somewhere where you can easily refer to them again, e.g. in your note-taking file or diary.

- 1 Who is there in an official position that you can discuss personal problems with?
- 2 Who can help you with advice on accommodation?
- 3 Who can help you with general academic problems?
- 4 List your hobbies and sports.
- 5 Do you know of teams, clubs etc which exist connected with the hobbies and sports that you are interested in? (Your tutor may be able to advise you on where to find information.)
- 6 Where would you find details of films, plays, concerts, and other entertainments in your area?

- 7 Who is your local doctor? (Name and address and phone number.)
- 8 Do you know of any student service that gives emergency help to students? (Your tutor may be able to help here.)
- 9 Is there a Students' Representative Council (or something similar) in your college?
- 10 If so, does it have someone with special responsibility either for
 - a) overseas students in general? or
 - b) the course that you are doing?
- 11 What are the hours of your college library
 - a) during term-time?
 - b) during vacation?
- 12 Do you know of any other libraries where you can study? When do they close?

If there is any other kind of information you feel you need, discuss it with your tutor and note the details.

Unit 2 Improving your reading efficiency

Reading with a purpose

Before you start reading a book or long article that is connected with your studies, it is always worthwhile taking a minute or two to ask yourself *why* you are reading it, and *what* you hope to learn from it. If you have no clear purpose in reading a text, or if you are confused about the purpose, the result can be: boredom; lack of comprehension; misunderstanding; or simply time wasted. Similarly, when you have finished reading, ask yourself: Have my purposes in reading been answered? What have I learnt?

Exercise 1

Different purposes require different kinds of reading material. Suggest the *kind* of reading material which one might use to fulfil the purposes under A. What do you think of the purposes under B? In what way are they different from those in A?

Reasons for reading:

- A
- 1 to get a general idea of what a particular subject is all about, expressed in language that is not too technical.
 - 2 to pass the time.
 - 3 to keep up-to-date with what is happening in the world.
 - 4 to find some information that might be useful for an essay.
 - 5 to get information about a country one intends to visit.
- B
- 1 because the book is on the course booklist.
 - 2 to keep up with the other students.

Exercise 2

- 1 Read the passage on 'Carbon' below (p. 10), with the following purpose: to find out *what* nylon is made from. Which part of the passage satisfies this purpose? Give line numbers.
- 2 Now look through the passage again with this purpose in mind: to find out what we mean by 'Hydrocarbor.'. Find the information as quickly as you can. Give line numbers.
- 3 Lastly read it with this purpose: to find out what is 'special' about carbon atoms. Give line numbers.

What do you notice about where the information is located in the text? Are the line numbers the same for questions 1, 2 and 3?

Carbon

Carbon is a very special material, and there are atoms of it in many things: for instance the 'lead' of a pencil is made of carbon, coal is made of carbon, and so are diamonds. A number of other things such as wood, plants, and oil are made very largely of carbon, but have other substances as well. The molecules which make up our bodies depend on carbon.

Carbon atoms are so special because they have the property of joining together into molecules in different ways. For instance, the atoms of coal and diamonds are joined together to make crystals, but each in its own pattern, and consequently from carbon atoms come two things so different to look at. A pencil 'lead' is also carbon, but here the atoms are arranged not in crystals but in flat sheets, far too small, of course, to see.

When we press a pencil onto paper, the paper pulls some of the sheets of atoms away, and these make the pencil marks. Paper may feel smooth, but it is rough enough to slide off some sheets of atoms. If you try to write on glass and cellophane, your pencil leaves no marks, for these are too smooth to pull the sheets away from the pencil 'lead'.

Besides forming into crystals and making sheets, carbon atoms can also form into long series of atoms, like chains. No other substance can do this so well. Each chain of carbon atoms can also have other substances attached to the links of the carbon chain. If the carbon chain has hydrogen atoms joined on to it, we have what scientists call a 'hydrocarbon'. Hydrocarbons give us molecules of oil, petrol, paraffin, tar, and natural gas, like that found under the North Sea.

Scientists have discovered that carbon chains can be very long, and can contain thousands of both carbon and other atoms. These long carbon chains are single molecules, but much more complicated than the single molecules of water, for instance, which are made of only three atoms (one of oxygen and two of hydrogen). These are the molecules of very complicated substances such as plastics, and living things such as our bodies, plants, and many kinds of food. The long chain of carbon and other atoms can be coiled up in different and very complicated ways. They can also be arranged in rings. The difference between different kinds of oils, such as petrol and paraffin, depends on the way in which the atoms are arranged in the molecules. The chemist can make petrol or paraffin from the oil out of an oil-well by heating it enough to change the pattern of the atoms in its molecules.

The chemist today has found out how to make new substances by heating materials made of hydrocarbon chains, such as oil or coal, in giant pressure cookers and mixing with

them other chemicals. When very hot indeed, the atoms of the other chemicals fit into the hydrocarbon chain and combine to make molecules of a new pattern. The result of this may be a plastic for making cups or washing-up bowls, or an artificial fibre for making clothes. Nylon, for example, is a man-made fibre with molecules made out of carbon chains in which atoms of nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen fit in a particular arrangement. Milk contains carbon chains, and the chemist can extract these and re-form them into a plastic for making solid things such as buttons and door handles.

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The carbon chains in living things are even more complicated than those in oils, plastics, or artificial fibres, and may contain hundreds of thousands of atoms; there is often more than one chain in each molecule, and these may be twisted together like ropes or bundles. It is a difficult problem for the scientist to unravel these complicated molecules, and therefore, although he can make an artificial fibre, he has not yet been able to fit the molecules together to make a living plant or animal.

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(From *A Book of Science* by Colin Ronan)

The fact is that having a definite purpose in mind means that some parts of what you read will probably not be relevant – these parts can be missed out or skimmed over very quickly. Other parts will be highly relevant and have to be studied in detail. Of course, it is quite possible that the information you are looking for may not be in the text after all – in which case, the sooner you find this fact out, the less time you will waste.

You should therefore *read actively*, i.e. with a clear purpose or with certain questions in mind. To read actively often means to *read selectively*, i.e. concentrating on what is relevant to your purpose. In the next few sections we shall discuss some other techniques to help bring about active reading.

Using the title

Sometimes, when you are reading through a bibliography, you have to make a decision, on the basis of the title alone, as to whether the book or article in question is going to be relevant to you. Usually, the titles of academic books and articles are factual and informative: they can almost be taken as very brief summaries of the contents of the text. So, when you are considering the title of a book or article, you have to ask yourself two questions:

- 1 Is this text relevant (or might it be relevant) to my purpose?
- 2 If it is relevant, what sort of question do I expect it to answer?