

Study Skills for Undergraduate Students

Workshop Handout 2008

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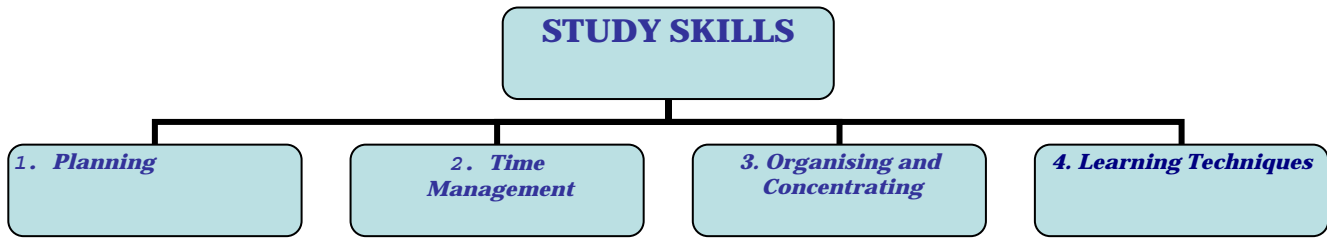


Academic Skills for Third Level Study

Over the course of your studies you will be expected to acquire a range of academic skills that demonstrate development in your learning. These will be gained over time through practice and feedback and are not expected of you immediately.

- **STUDY SKILLS:** from the outset you will have to learn good study skills in order to manage the work-load and time pressures that are part of being a student. This will involve recognising what type of learner you are and organising your time and life around your college year.
- **NOTE-TAKING:** this will be your means of recording and understanding information in lectures, demonstrations, work placements, assignments, and reading of texts.
- **RESEARCHING:** familiarity with information systems (library, web etc) and the use of appropriate research methods to find relevant information for your studies
- **READING:** development of a reading strategy that is effective and relevant in the context of your study and time frame.
- **CRITICAL ANALYTICAL THINKING:** the ability to weigh up arguments and evidence 'for' and 'against', checking for accuracy, logic, comparison of theorists and the development your own arguments based on your analysis of your reading and research.
- **WRITING:** developing the skills of writing that display clarity of thought, logical progression, critical analysis and evidence-based knowledge to support your arguments. There are a number of writing formats required at third-level that include presentations, reports, essays and theses.

STUDY SKILLS



1. Planning

Planning involves setting SMART study goals that are achievable. These can be both short-term and long-term goals. You need to take a broad look at everything you have to cover on your course and break it down into goals that are;

S = Specific, M = Measurable, A = Action Related, R = Realistic, T = Time-Based

2. Time Management

Start controlling how you use your time effectively by designing a timetable and sticking to it. Too much time is wasted getting stressed about having no time to do anything. It may mean prioritising, delegating, cutting back on leisure and social activities during your studies, but it will pay off. However, you do need to take some time to rest, exercise and recharge your mental batteries!

3. Organising and Concentrating

It can be difficult to motivate yourself to study but you need to think of the end result. What are you aiming for? Putting in the work now will bring rewards longterm. When you have your study plan and timetable created start by studying in blocks of time, 40 - 60 minutes is usually a good stretch. Your concentration will only last for a limited amount of time so you might need to change subject or topic. Set a reward for yourself at the end of the session or end of the week. Do not be tempted by outside distractions. Study in a quiet, warm place and ask not to be disturbed.

4. Learning Techniques

We all have different ways of learning and revising. You will need to develop good memory techniques. There are certain skills involved to improve your learning styles.

Method 1: PQ2R

P = Preview; Quickly skim the text and try to get an overview of the content and chapter.

Look for section headings, illustrative charts and diagram or key words. Do not highlight yet.

Q = Question; Look for answers to the basis questions of Who? What? When? Why? How?

Identify the main theme or learning from the text.

R = Read; Now read the text again with these questions in mind. You will now be looking for answers. Highlight or make notes of the key points in the text that you need to know.

R = Review; Always check your understanding of the material by testing your recall before putting the text away. Do your notes answer the questions you have? Summarise your answers and revisit again later.

Method 2: Flash Cards

Use Flash Cards (small cards) to record the key points and information on different subjects and topics that can be looked over very quickly. Key points will stay in your memory as opposed to large pieces of information. From the key points you can develop your answers in the exam.

Method 3: Mind Maps

One of the best methods for organising information and creating links is designing a Mind Map, (*see Tony Buzan on this*). Pick any topic, e.g. an English novel, and from the core title map out on paper the themes, characters, and relevant information linked to it. By looking at something visually you can bring it back into your mind and down on paper much quicker than trying to write about it from scratch!

Method 4: Chunking and Repetition

Chunking is a good way of remembering numbers (e.g. telephone numbers). This means grouping information into chunks and holding it in your short-term memory. Repetition means going back over again and again the material you have studied to keep it fresh in your mind. This can be done at the end of every study session and at the end of every study week.

Taking Lectures Notes

- Most lectures last 45-50 minutes and you will not be able to write down every word the lecturer says. You will need to learn to listen carefully and pick out the relevant key points of the lecture
- Depending on the style of lecturing and subject most will have an Introduction, Middle and End
- The Middle section will be the main body and you need to take note of referred theorists, evidence and arguments, key names, dates, ideas etc.
- The Ending is usually a summary of the lecture with the main points – make sure you note these
- Be there on time and ready to take notes. Someone else's notes may not be entirely accurate, key information could be missing and their interpretation of information could be very different to yours
- Have adequate paper, pens, highlighters and any equipment needed
- Sit where you can see and hear the lecturer
- Apply an organised system – keep a specific lecture folder/copybook per subject
- Develop your own style of abbreviation (e.g., &, +)
- Develop your own shorthand system (e.g. th=theory, dev=development)
- Record any ideas or suggestions made in the lecture for further development
- Go to the library and keep on track with what is discussed in the lecture through recommended reading material
- Remember, these notes may be vital for your exam revision at a later stage so take care with your writing and interpretation

Reading Strategy

SQ3R Method

SQ3R is a flexible strategy that can be applied in different ways to different materials, to suit your own purpose. These are the basic stages:

1. Try to get the general drift of the material you are looking at by carrying out a quick *preview* or *survey* of the text
2. While you are doing your survey, start asking yourself *questions* that you might expect to find answers to, if you think the text worth reading more carefully.
3. Now *Read* the text carefully
4. When you have finished reading, try to *recall* the main points
5. Check how well you have recalled by writing them down and going back to *review* the text

This system will allow you to develop Critical Questioning skills. You will be asking questions in a critical way, such as:

Who and What is it about?
Why?
When?
How far?
How much?
How often?
To what extent?
How do we know this is true?
How reliable is the source?
What could be going on below the surface?
What do we not know about this?
Are there conflicting arguments elsewhere?
Which is preferable?
For what reasons?

CRITICAL THINKING WHEN READING

In order to develop your own thinking and writing skills you need to be able to critically analyse the work of other people.

1. Identify the line of reasoning – The ‘Argument’ which is:

A line of reasoning *or*

An angle or a point of view *or*

A position that is being defended *or*

A case that is being made backed up by evidence and examples leading to conclusions

2. Critically evaluate the line of reasoning – what does it contain

Relevant, contributing and sufficient propositions (reasons)

Logical progression

False premises (i.e. weak foundations)

Flawed reasoning (i.e. assuming a causal connection, drawing general conclusions based on one or few examples, inappropriate comparisons)

3. Question surface appearances – examine the facts

Is the evidence what it appears to be?

Might there be other explanations apart from the obvious one?

Has all the necessary information been given?

Are there hidden assumptions or agendas?

Is the evidence impartial?

4. Identify the evidence in the Text

Look for statistics, examples, case histories, finding from experiments, surveys, questionnaires or case studies.

5. Evaluate the evidence – use valid criteria

Check dates, sources, bias, beware of allure of numbers and statistics (i.e. most/many, percentages), representatives, conditions of data collection, emotive language and persuader words.

6. Identify the writer’s conclusions

Conclusions usually come at the end of a piece of writing. It is summarising the evidence and presenting an argument using words such as ‘therefore’, ‘so’, ‘hence’ or ‘thus’. Also, use of imperatives that indicate that something needs to be done such as ‘must’, ‘should’, ‘need to’, ‘recommend’.

7. Evaluating whether the evidence supports the conclusions

Are the conclusions warranted by the evidence presented? Do they stand up?

ACADEMIC WRITING

A large percentage of your assignments and exams will require you to write in an essay style format. An essay is a piece of writing with a particular structure and layout. It is advisable to check with your tutor regarding specific styles required as these may vary in different courses and faculties. *The following is a guide on essay and report writing.*

The task requires an organised approach and should not be launched into straight away without planning and research.

CRITICAL THINKING WHEN WRITING

- Be clear about your conclusions
- Have a clear line of reasoning
- Use evidence to support your reasoning
- Evaluate your own writing through critical reading
- Take multiple perspectives

Stella Cottrell's 7 Point Plan for Essay Writing

1. Clarify the Task – examine the essay title carefully to determine what is required
2. Collect and Record Information – be selective and do not procrastinate by extended and unnecessary reading. Record all information as you go along, e.g. names, titles – these can be your reference/bibliography
3. Organise and Plan – make rough outlines, use mind maps. Planning helps you think clearly and organise material logically.
4. Reflect and Evaluate – what have you discovered, have you clarified an argument?
5. Write an Outline Plan and First Draft – you have to start somewhere – it is okay to start in the middle of the essay (i.e. your main points), then your conclusion, then your introduction.
6. Work on your First Draft – Rewrite and adapt your structure. Make sure your argument is clear. Check that you have provided evidence and examples. Write your reference list and bibliography. Watch word count.
7. Final Draft – Edit and Check this until you are happy with it.

ESSAY WRITING

Structure

- 1. Title/Question** Whole of essay must focus on the title.
- 2. Introduction** Explain what the essay is going to do, identify issues to be explored and how you will deal with each issue.
- 3. Develop argument or line of reasoning** Each paragraph is a new idea/theme to be discussed
- 4. Conclusion** No *new* material here. Summarise your argument and main themes. State your conclusions assertively. Last sentence should sum up your argument briefly, linking it to the title.
- 5. References and/or Bibliography** List all books, articles and other materials you have referred to within the essay. This should be done alphabetically.

Style

- Avoid:** Repetition of Words
Repetition of Ideas
Redundancy (delete unnecessary words)
Wordiness
'Un-Academic' Language (i.e can't = cannot, don't = do not, or subjective language = I feel, I think)
Illogical Sentences
Poor Signposting – divide ideas into paragraphs with the opening sentence in each paragraph signalling the essence of the paragraph
Mixing Tenses (past, present and future)

Clarity – express your point in a straightforward way and do not use long-winded sentences

6 Easy Steps for Report Writing

A report is generally a factual document produced after a piece of research has been conducted, e.g. on organisations, study visits, personal learning. Reports on research conducted should be as objective as possible.

- Step 1:** Gathering Information
- Step 2:** Planning – Sift material, decide on headings/sub-headings
- Step 3:** Summary – Try writing this before you write the full report, it focuses you on what you want to achieve
- Step 4&5:** Drafts – Is it easy to read? Does it flow? Is it logical and well laid out? Ask someone you trust to read the report.
- Step 6:** Final Draft – Check again for accuracy. Avoid using names of people if possible – use job titles. Read your report from the reader's point of view.

PUTTING AN ESSAY TOGETHER: THE KEY POINTS

➤ Analysing the Question

Underlining the key words (*breaking it down*)

Identifying problem areas (*what is not asked*)

Following the instructions (*discuss, analyse, describe etc*)

➤ Taking Stock

Create a mind map about what you know on the topic (*this will help you decide if you have a choice of essays!*)

➤ Doing Your Research

Background reading (from lecture notes, recommended reading lists etc.)

➤ The Plan

The ABC of an Essay (Introduction, middle and conclusion)

(ref: Rose, J.)

ESSAY WRITING

Examples of Two Types of Essays

1. Discursive Essays

e.g. “Discuss the impact of the Vikings on Ireland”.

You are not being asked here to *describe*, but to *discuss*, i.e. to offer both opposing and supporting arguments in your essay.

2. Comparative/Contrastive Essays

Compare = look at the similarities

Contrast = look at the differences

e.g. “Compare and contrast the theories of child development proposed by Bowlby and Piaget”.

Exercise: Sample title

“Discuss the proposition that education is wasted on the young

Examine the title, underline key words and map the various ideas and issues that come to you on the topic

A Possible Approach to Exercise Question

A. Introduction:

explains that the statement is broad so you need to explain your approach and that you are addressing both sides of the argument, including educating adults

B. Middle (3 paragraphs):

B.1 – education is wasted on the young

Evidence – poor literacy, truancy, violence in schools

&

Comment – look at possible causes for this with supportive evidence

B.2 – education is vital for the young

Evidence – lack of education can lead to a number of social problems, economic factor, love of learning

&

Comment – essential to train future workforce, society's moral duty

B.3 – education for adults

Evidence – need for upskilling and retraining, people learn at different times

&

Comment – re-educating is cost-effective, helps with social problems etc.

C. Conclusion

what does the weight of evidence suggest regarding educating at all levels, value of education, development of human potential etc.

(ref: Rose, J.)

Academic Words Used in Essay and Examination Titles

<i>Analyse</i>	examine in very close detail, identify important points, pros and cons
<i>Assess</i>	weigh up the value of and give a judgement
<i>Comment on</i>	identify and write about the main issues, giving your reactions based upon what you have read or heard. Avoid purely personal opinion
<i>Compare</i>	show the similarities between two given items
<i>Contrast</i>	point out all the differences between items
<i>Evaluate</i>	critically make an opinion of the worth of something, assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides with criteria to guide your argument (i.e.theories, models)
<i>Define</i>	give the exact meaning of
<i>Describe</i>	give a detailed account
<i>Discuss</i>	offer both opposing and supporting arguments.
<i>Explain</i>	give details and opinions in your own words
<i>Explore</i>	examine from various standpoints, showing the implications
<i>Identify</i>	show your knowledge of a topic
<i>Illustrate</i>	make something clear and explicit, giving examples or evidence
<i>Interpret</i>	give a clear and exact meaning of something
<i>Justify</i>	show adequate grounds for conclusions etc.
<i>Outline</i>	give the main points of
<i>Relate</i>	show how things are connected to each other
<i>State</i>	give facts and details in clear order
<i>Summarise</i>	give a brief account of
<i>To what extent</i>	Consider how far something is true, or contributes to a final outcome. Consider also ways in which the proposition is not true. (The answer is usually somewhere between 'completely' and 'not at all')

REPORT WRITING

A report is generally a factual document produced after an activity, i.e. work placement, field trip, piece of research has been conducted, e.g. on organisations, study visits, personal learning. Again check departmental guidelines on the style of report to be submitted as these can vary between subjective or objective requirements

Six Easy Steps for Writing the Report

- Step 1: Gathering Information**
- Step 2: Planning – Sift material, decide on headings/sub-headings**
- Step 3: Summary – Try writing this before you write the full report, as it focuses you on what you are trying to achieve**
- Step 4&5: Drafts – Is it easy to read? Does it flow? Is it logical and well laid out? Ask someone you trust to read the report.**
- Step 6: Final Draft – Check again for accuracy. Avoid using names of people if possible – use job titles. Read your report from the readers point of view.**

Contents: can contain all or some of the following

Cover Page
Contents Page
Summary of Report
Objectives and Scope of Report
History or Background to Subject
Description of Situation and Relevant Factors
Implications and Options
Conclusions and Recommendations (if appropriate)

REFERENCING and BIBLIOGRAPHY

For academic writing you will be required to submit evidence of the material you have sourced and used in your writing (i.e. direct quotes and paraphrasing). This is the system of referencing and can be provided in a reference or bibliography section.

Referencing: In order to avoid PLAGIARISM you have to reference your sources when reproducing them in essays, reports and theses. To use someone else's ideas in this way is seen as intellectual theft!

Bibliography: Is a list of everything you read for your assignment, whether or not you referred to it in your writing or not. Some colleges may require it to be a separate section to your reference list but it is styled in the same format as your reference list, (Harvard).

Two methods of referencing are:

- (1) **Paraphrase** – involves reporting a point an author makes in a book or article etc. *in your own words* rather than in direct quotation
- (2) **Direct Quotation** – only use direct quotation sparingly, in particular from an authoritative text, i.e. government report, primary source (historical document)

The key components of referencing are:

1. Author
2. Editor (s)
3. Author of Chapter
4. Year of Publication
5. Title of Book
6. Publisher
7. Place of Publication
8. Article

Two Main Systems of Referencing in Colleges

1. The Harvard System (used primarily in WIT)

(a) Paraphrasing:

According to Turner and Ash (1997:34), the well-being of tourists and the safety of their property are threatened by terrorism, disease, accidents, theft, cheating and even local law enforcement

(b) Direct Quotation:

Turner and Ash state that “the well-being of tourists and the safety of their property are threatened by terrorism, disease, accidents, theft, cheating and even local law enforcement”, (1997:34).

The full details of Turner and Ash’s book will be given at the very end of the essay in the Reference section (or Bibliography section). There is no need to mention the title of the book in the body of the essay.

2. The Footnoting/Endnoting System

According to Turner and Ash, the well-being of tourists and the safety of their property are threatened by terrorism, disease, accidents, theft, cheating and even local law enforcement¹.
(see below)

Footnotes can be used at the end of the page or listed at the end of the essay (endnotes). It will depend on the department requirements.

Examples of a book reference, a chapter in a book and an electronic reference:

Bailey, P. (1978) *Leisure and Class in Victorian England*. London: Methuen

Humm, M. (1991) ‘Landscape for a literary feminism: British women writers 1900 to the present’. In Forsas-Scott, H. (ed.). *Textual Liberation: European feminist writing in the twentieth century*. London: Routledge.

Available at: <http://www.foe.co.uk>. (Accessed: 16 May 1998)

¹ Michael Turner and Sharon Ash, *Tourism and Crime in the USA*, (New York, 1997) p.34

EXAM TECHNIQUES

For many students the prospect of doing exams can be extremely daunting as it brings back memories of previous experiences for some and the unknown for others. As exams usually come at the end of an intensive semester or academic year you may be tired and finding it difficult to focus. It is unlikely that you will be able to cover everything that you have learned over the term time so you may have to prioritise and be selective in your study and exam preparation.

REVISION

(1) Reviewing:

- ***The Scope of the Course***: Read through course outlines and reading lists to identify what topics are examinable, know number of questions to be answered, duration of exam etc.
- ***Previous Exam Topics and Questions***: Survey past exam papers and check for patterns evident in the type of questions asked from year to year. WARNING – examiners do produce surprises so be prepared for this.
- ***Your Notes***: Organise yearly essays, all relevant notes, handouts, photocopied articles and divide into sections of subject and course.

(2) Check Your Understanding of Content

- Clear up any questions with lecturers and/or tutors that you may have
- Refer back to primary texts for quick synopsis of content and theories

(3) Summarise Key Points in the Form of Possible Exam Questions:

- Construct summaries for each examinable topic on the course. These can be developed in the exam itself. Use a Mind Map system or Flash Cards to record these if you are a visual learner. They should contain the following:
 - your introduction; a concise statement of the question underlying this topic/issue/theory. Have an opening line learned off as a trigger to start you writing
 - key definitions and assumptions
 - a list of important features/relevant research findings
 - a summary of points of disagreement/controversies
 - a brief list of criticisms/evaluative comments
 - conclusions

(4) Test Yourself Under Exam Conditions:

- Recall your summaries
- Answer previous exam papers
- Draw diagrams from memory

Effective Revision = Constant reinforcing of the information by revising after 24 hours, 1 week, 1 month until it becomes familiar and easier to recall

Pre-Exam

You cannot avoid the nerves and stress of exam but you can learn to manage them by adequate preparation;

- Know the date, time, duration and location of each exam – put it in your calendar
- Design a Revision Timetable
- Know the subject and part of the course being examined
- Be familiar with previous exam papers
- Make sure you get exercise and plenty of rest before and during the exams; walking to the exam hall is a good opportunity to get the brain cells working.
- On the day; arrive on time and make sure you are seated at the correct table – your exam number should be on the table if that is the system in the college

Answering the Exam Paper

- Time manage your exam by breaking it down into parts
- Allocate specific time to each question, time for planning and rereading at the end
- When you receive the paper do not look around for the reactions of classmates
- Check that you have received the correct paper as you may be in a large hall with a combination of courses being examined
- Write your name and any required details on answer sheet
- Review all the questions and nominate the ones you are going to answer
- Quickly write down your notes, key points, maps or diagrams on the scribble section of the answer sheets.
- It may be better to start with your best questions and leave the difficult ones until the end
- Always keep the question in mind – ‘what am I being asked here?’
- If a question has several parts, make sure you deal with all of them in your answer
- Watch your timing on a regular basis
- If you run out of time, write down your main points to the question
- Keep writing until the examiner asks you to stop
- Allow 10 minutes at the end to reread your answers
- After the exam, avoid POST-MORTEMs. You have no control over the past, focus on the next paper

Useful Tips for Mature Students

- From the very first day you start college keep an open mind to what you see, hear and experience
- Familiarise yourself with the college layout and services early in the week. This may be part of a first year orientation programme but it is often difficult to absorb all the information given to you in the first couple of days and you should locate places yourself in your own time.
- Check if there is a Student Handbook, Mature Student Handbook or Learning Support Handbook available in the college for first year students.
- Make a timetable and find all lecture halls in advance of your classes
- Sign up for a tour of the library and learn how to use the library information system immediately. When it comes to referencing for assignments the quickest way to get details of books and journals that you have forgotten to record is through the library information system.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions if you do not understand something, you are probably not the only one!
- Find out where all the relevant support services are in the college as you may need them at short notice, e.g. student card office, medical centre, student access centre.
- Get your student I.D. card as soon as possible as you will need it for the library
- Attend any orientation talks on offer for students throughout the first few weeks as these may include very valuable learning support sessions
- Join a club or society to make friends and have a social outlet. There may be a Mature Student Society in the college, so check it out.
- Introduce yourself to other mature students in your class
- Only invest in books that are essential and that you will need long-term, the majority can be found in the college library
- Check noticeboards for second-hand books and accommodation notices
- Finally, if you are finding it difficult to cope and thinking of leaving college talk to someone about this. There are support services in the colleges – counselling, pastoral care, access officer, retention officer, careers centre, who will be able to help you. Seek them out and don't go it alone!

Recommended Reading List

Relevant books on studying and writing for third level are available in 808 section of WIT Luke Wadding Library.

Coman, M.J. & Heavers, K.L. (1998) *How to Improve Yours Study Skills*. Chicago: NTC Publishing.

Cottrell, S. (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook (2nd ed.)*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fry, R. (1997) *How to Study*. London: Kogan Press Ltd.

Lashley, C (1995) *Improving Study Skills*. London: Cassell.

Northledge, A. (2007) *The Good Study Guide*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Pears, R. & Graham, S. (2006) “*Cite them right: the essential guide to referencing and plagiarism*”. Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.

Redman, P. (2001) *Good Essay Writing: A Social Sciences Guide*. Milton Keynes: OPU.

Rose, J. (2007) *The Mature Student's Guide to Writing*. (2nd Ed.) Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Waterford Institute of Technology (2006) *Student Information Handbook 07-08*. Waterford: WIT

Waterford Institute of Technology. *National Certificate in Community Education and Development Student Handbook*. Waterford: WIT

