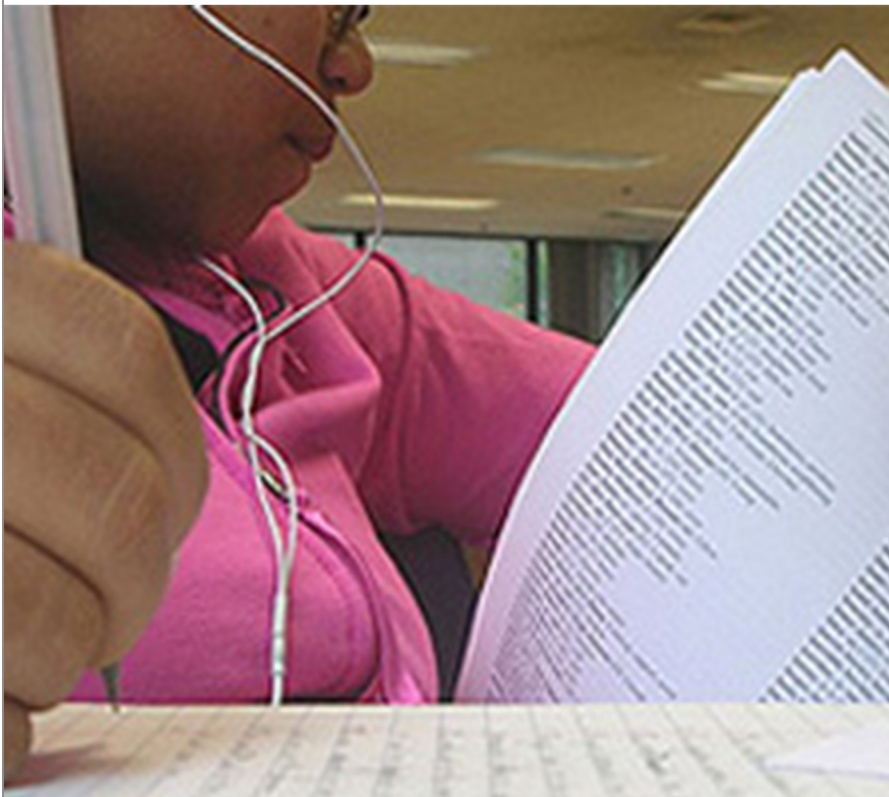


Learning how to learn



Learning how to learn



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Walton Hall,

Milton Keynes,

MK7 6AA

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Introduction

Learning how to learn is a process in which we all engage throughout our lives, although often we do not realise that we are, in fact, learning **how** to learn. Most of the time we concentrate on **what** we are learning rather than **how** we are learning it. In this course, we aim to make the process of learning much more explicit by inviting you to apply the various ideas and activities to your own current or recent study as a way of increasing your awareness of your own learning. Most learning has to be an active process - and this is particularly true of learning how to learn. Therefore, you will find that this course contains a number of activities for you to complete, which require you to make notes and keep records. You can either write these down in a notebook, or use word processor, whichever you feel most comfortable with.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- think about and understand personal ways of learning
- apply the ideas and activities in this course to existing learning experiences
- learn reflectively.

1 Getting started

1.1 Examples

Each activity is followed by a discussion and examples of the responses of two students. Both students are studying Open University courses that will eventually count towards a degree. These are nine month distance learning courses.

Course material is delivered to students by post, email or online. Their assignments are submitted by post or email, marked either by a computer or a tutor, and returned. Open University students are provided with a tutor, regular tutorials and guidance on completing assignments. They are also provided with online conferencing facilities to communicate with their tutor or with other students.

Both students have been provided with assignment booklets, which provide advice on completing their assignments. They also refer to Study Skills series of books, which are published by the Open University. The series includes books providing study skills advice in particular subject disciplines, as well as general study skills advice.

Tim is studying an introductory Humanities course and Sue is a biology student.

1.2 What do we mean by learning how to learn?

Activity 1

This activity will help you to explore what we mean by learning how to learn.

Think back to an example of study you have done in the past, or any fairly structured learning opportunity you remember. Focus on a particular activity or task when you were consciously engaged in learning. Jot down a brief description of **what** you were learning - what was the subject, topic or task? Having reminded yourself of that, write a brief description of **how** you were learning it.

This is what Tim wrote:

There was a prep essay which was due before the course started. To be honest, I was really nervous. It took me ages - I kept changing the words round over and over again. I wasn't feeling very confident because I haven't written an essay for about 20 years. I started to panic a bit because I only had a couple of evenings put aside to do it. I thought that if I kept on writing, I'd get there in the end. It wasn't productive and I had no idea of what I was trying to do - a bull in a china shop approach really.

Now that I've thought about it I can see that I was trying to write the essay without planning how I was going to do it. I didn't approach it systematically at all - that's why I couldn't get started. It was a real learning curve though because when I got my feedback from my tutor, it was clear that I hadn't actually answered the question - to be honest, I'd hardly read it. I just homed in on the topic. I made the assumption that I was no good at writing essays. It's taken me a while to work out what was happening but I think I've learned that good essays don't just 'happen'.

Sue's notes were different:

- I was reading one of the set books and studying graphs - trying to interpret the information, especially that needed to answer Q1 on my first assignment.
- I read it over and over again; I thought I understood it but was not sure.
- There was so much information, I thought 'I'll never remember all this.' It all seemed to be important.
- If I try to understand basic principles rather than try to remember all the details I might do better, and valuable study time will be more effective.

Can you begin to see the difference between thinking about **what** you were learning and **how** you were learning; between the content of your study and the process of doing it? Only when you begin to examine the process are you likely to consider whether there might be other more effective ways of studying. We are certainly not suggesting that you engage in this activity every time you study, but being aware of the two dimensions of study and being able to analyse both of them is an important part of learning how to learn. You will notice that the focus here is on learning - **your** learning. It may be that the example you chose to examine was an occasion when you were being taught to do something. In this course we do not look at the teaching side of the experience, although that does not mean it is unimportant. Here the emphasis is on you and your learning in **any** learning situation, and this places a considerable responsibility on you to think through the process. It also encourages you to understand more of what happens to you when you learn. As well as enhancing your learning, this can increase your control over your own learning; you may find this is an approach that is new to you, but do give it a try.

2 Thinking about your learning

2.1 Introduction

In encouraging you to think explicitly about **how** you learn, as well as about **what** you learn, we are drawing on research about learning which has shown that this approach can actually improve your performance. Certainly it can and will make you a more efficient and effective learner. Before we start to explore the process, let us consider two general points about learning.

1. There is no single method of learning that guarantees success. How you learn best depends on many different factors, some of which we will explore in this course. One of the main reasons for producing the course is to help you find out which approach to learning is most effective for you in a range of different contexts. In each context, different tasks will require different approaches.
2. What works best for you will not necessarily be the same as the approach used by other students, even those studying the same course. We are all unique as learners, although there are some patterns that emerge in any group of students. It is important to explore a whole range of approaches because that will enable you to find out what works best for you. By all means, do share ideas, techniques, tips and hints with other students and do try some that seem to work well for your colleagues, but if they do not work for you, modify or reject their suggestions. And that goes for the ideas in this course as well.

The most important aspect of learning how to learn is that you really do need to actively **think** about your learning. Let us continue thinking about your learning by moving from the analysis of a single learning activity to a wider view of you as a learner. Two main things will probably affect your approach to learning:

- your motivation (the reasons why you are engaged in a particular course of study)
- your previous history as a learner, both in a formal setting (such as at school or on another course) and informally, through unstructured or unexpected learning experiences.

Pause for a moment and consider each of these two points in turn.

2.2 Your motivation

Activity 2

Why did you decide to become a student and what do you hope to gain from your studies?

Think about this question for a few minutes and then note down your response.

Have you recorded only one reason for why you became a student or are there several reasons? Have your reasons for studying changed since you became a student? What you want to gain from studying may be something very specific (like promotion) or perhaps very personal (like increased self-confidence).

Here is what Tim wrote:

I've always worked with computers but I actually have a dream. I'd like to be a teacher. I'm particularly interested in music and history. I suppose I'm also attracted to the idea of being able to say that I've got a degree - it'll make me feel good about myself. I hope that doesn't sound as if I'm not interested in the content, because I'm also looking forward to learning new things! This year is just a starting point to achieving my long-term goals.

This is Sue's response:

Decided to be a distance learning student because I'm a nurse and work shifts. The distance learning system seemed to suit me. Wanted to do psychology degree. Chose **Biology, brain and behaviour** as the course title sounds good and the description appealed to me. Might do science degree. This course relevant to psychology and science degrees.

Most students have a mixture of reasons for studying, some more dominant than others. And many students find their motives change over time. It is a good idea to pause occasionally and review your motives because being aware of them may affect your attitude to study and how you organise it. When things seem to get difficult, reflecting on your reasons for being a student may help you reorganise your priorities.

2.3 Your learning history

Activity 3

You do not need to explore this in detail - just pause for a moment and think about:

- one good (enjoyable and effective) learning experience
- one experience that was perhaps less effective and enjoyable.

Then ask yourself **why** the first was more effective and **why** the second was not.

Here is Tim's response:

A good, enjoyable learning experience

I can think of a number of things. One of the first enjoyable experiences was starting to use a computer back in 1988. PCs were very new then and there wasn't really much help available, nor was there much in the way of software. I just switched it on and had a go. Basically, I learned by doing it, even if I made mistakes. Each time I switched it on, I discovered something new. There was no pressure and I could learn at my own pace.

Not so enjoyable

Recently, I registered for a programming course at my local college but I found it really difficult to concentrate in the evenings. Although a lot of it was hands on, we had to

attend some lectures as well - I completely lost my way on several occasions and almost fell asleep!

It's been really helpful to write all this down. It seems that I do find it difficult to learn if I can't work at my own pace. Also, I like to be doing things - I'm not very good at just listening, especially when I'm feeling tired after a long day at work. Another thing is that I hate being made to feel stupid - I think that's linked to a lack of confidence because I always assume that other people are better at things than I am.

Again your individual responses may be different to those of other students; do compare your responses if you have an opportunity to do so. Try to analyse what affected your learning experiences - what did work well for you and why? Then consider what did not work well for you - what made those specific learning experiences unsuccessful?

Sue's response was different:

Good experience

- Last year, an assignment on memory because subject matter interesting. Fascinating. Wanted to know more. Actually enjoyed it! Did well.

Bad experience

- A question on Freud because subject matter difficult, not really my scene but chose it to try to understand it. Didn't enjoy it. A real struggle. Poor mark but tutor comments now seem helpful.

You may have found that there is a link between your responses to Activities 2 and 3. Your current motives for studying may link to your earlier learning experiences - such as now wanting to study in depth some subject you remember enjoying but had to give up. Or maybe you looked at some maths materials that a friend, family member or colleague was studying and thought, 'This is much more interesting than the maths I did at school - I could do this!'

Whatever your responses to these two activities, it is likely that you will have some emotional feelings about why you remembered and recorded them. Emotions and feelings are often part of our learning. We all have a learning history that has both positive and negative experiences. Maybe the reason your learning did not go too well was nothing to do with the topic or the activity, but simply that - like Tim - you had had a difficult day and found it impossible to concentrate. All learning has an affective component (to do with feelings) as well as a cognitive one (to do with thinking). Recognising this - and resolving any tensions in our feelings about learning - is an important part of learning how to learn.

2.4 Organising your study - keeping a learning diary

If you have found this approach to learning interests you, you might like to take the analysis a stage further. To do Activity 4, you need to be studying a course so that you are engaged in learning on a regular basis. To examine your learning patterns, try keeping a

'learning diary' over a short period of time - at least a week - or maybe during the period that you are studying a particular section of your course.

Activity 4

The process of keeping a learning diary is simple. On the first page, draw up a daily diary and record in summary form what days and times you were engaged in your work. Then for each study session or activity keep a record of:

- the practical details - what, when, where and how you studied
- the study methods and the various skills you used
- your feelings about the methods of studying you used
- a note on the effectiveness of each session
- a comment on how you might change your practice to be more effective next time.

To really learn from this activity, you could stop reading this course now and return to it after recording your study activities over a few days. Or, you may prefer to go on reading and return to the activity when we revisit this task later in the course.

The real value of keeping a learning diary is what you decide to do with the information once you have recorded it. You need to set aside a time when you can look back at your notes, see what you can learn from them about how you learn, and then consider any changes you might make.

For example, look at your diary and consider:

- What circumstances were most conducive to study?
- What sessions worked best (where/when/how long)?
- What activities were most successful and why?
- How much planning in advance did you do - about how/when/where/what you would work on?
- What did you do if you got stuck/lost concentration/felt unmotivated?
- What changes can you make that might improve the effectiveness of your study?
- Where or to whom can you go for help and advice?

Here is part of Tim's diary:

10 Feb.

Have worked out timetable for study. Will try to stick to it! Will try to do two hours per day - every day - one morning and one evening, even at the weekends.

9.30 p.m. to 11.30 p.m. - Started on course 1. Didn't cover many pages (8) but have done the activities and made loads of notes. That'll help me remember. Worried about how long it's taking. Didn't really feel like working this evening though - bit tired after meeting at work and didn't get home until 8.30. The whole thing was a real struggle and I can't say that I enjoyed it.

11 Feb.

6.30 a.m. to 7.30 a.m. - Good progress this morning. Getting up at 6.30 isn't nearly as bad as I thought it'd be. Still worried about how long I'm taking to work through this course though.

Didn't manage anything this evening. Wanted to watch the football and then not in the mood.

12th Feb.

6.30 a.m. to 7.30 a.m. - Did usual hour this morning. Achieved quite a lot - made me feel really good. Stopping to look at the illustration book breaks time up. Had first, proper tutorial this evening and met someone I used to go to school with - haven't seen him for 20 years! Signed up for self-help group and Bob and I will definitely get in touch anyway. Tutor has suggested that we try different forms of note taking. Couldn't study after tutorial. Too tired when I got home. I'm already behind my schedule.

13 Feb. etc.

What I've learned from doing this

Writing things down has enabled me to pull out some surprising points:

I'm really a 'morning' person so I should avoid studying late at night if possible. I might think about doing a bit before dinner though if I'm home at a reasonable time. It's worth studying for half an hour or so at a time - over a week it adds up.

Sue's notes were brief but to the point:

Tues 3 March eve. Read through Book 1 Ch. 1–5 again. Made extra notes. Each time I read something, I find something new to note.

Sat 8 March am. Realised the first assignment is based on first 9 chapters of Book 1! Mustn't panic. Concentrated on Q1 first - genetics - I need to understand this. Read Ch. 3 several times, concentrating on diagrams.

Tues 10 March eve Q1 parts 1 and 2 seem to be OK and straightforward, but worth only 5 marks each. Not sure about the rest (worth the other 40 marks!). Jotted down ideas. Need to think. Will come back to it. Q2 is essay. Need to start this. Subject sounds OK - how animals stop behaving in a particular way. Found relevant sections in 3 different chapters. Draft 1 started.

Sat 14 March on and off all day Realised essay was on how animals STOP behaving and all my notes are on START behaving!! Drew up new plan. Did draft 1.

Sun 15 March on and off most of day Finished Q1. Draft 2 of Q2.

Mon 16 March eve Must finish and post. Due in tomorrow. A few minor changes to essay - no time for any more.

Sat 28 March Assignment came back - 65%. Quite pleased but tutor comments explained how I could have got more if I'd checked the precise wording of the questions a bit more carefully. So felt I'd short-changed myself. Decided to underline key words in future.

At this point it might be worth considering how you developed your approach to study. Are you using methods you used in other learning situations? Have you ever thought about how you work or do you just 'get on with it'? Have you used any books on how to study or discussed study methods with other students or with your tutor?

Many of us use methods that we have developed from a range of experiences and sources - some of which are likely to be more effective than others. Being aware of **how** we learn enables us to make choices about the most appropriate way to tackle any learning task more efficiently and effectively. This does not imply that you have to be

organised and regimented in your study programme - it means just thinking about what works best for you. If you feel comfortable with a relaxed and unpredictable approach that suits you and your lifestyle, that's fine. But if that approach is not working too well, at least you should be considering the possibility of changing it.

3 Learning through assessment

3.1 Introduction to applying your learning

In this part of the course we invite you to apply some of the ideas we have introduced in a more structured way. One of the easiest ways to really understand learning how to learn as a **process**, rather than as a series of individual activities, is to apply it to a section of the course you are currently studying. Choose a section that is complete in itself - for example, a block of the course - and that leads to an assignment. We suggest that you read through the whole of this section and its associated activities, and then decide how you might apply it to your own work on your current course.

When you want to try this out for yourself, you will need to allocate some of your (study) time to completing each activity in this section. Even if you have a very tight schedule, it will be time well spent. Some students have found that working through this process affects their approach to study in a way that both enhances their performance in the short term, and has lasting effects on their learning.

One idea is to use a separate notebook (or put together a document on your computer) to record your responses to the activities. Alternatively, if you choose to include your responses in with your normal study notes, use a different coloured pen (or font if you word process your notes). This will enable you to distinguish your learning about **how** to learn from **what** you are learning while still seeing how the two interact.

If you know another student who is studying the same course, why not suggest you share your responses to the activities? You could do this by meeting (at tutorials or elsewhere), by post or phone, or by email. Finally, it is a good idea to tell your tutor that you are going to try the activities - part of learning how to learn is developing a good learning dialogue with your tutor.

As on previous pages, the activities over the following sections will include responses from both Tim and Sue. Tim was working on the course, and Sue was working on the final assignment for her biology course

NB: Because of the way the responses are presented on the web, the user is presented with both in succession, rather than in a format that allows easy comparison.

3.2 A summary of the phases and activities of learning how to learn

We can represent the process of learning how to learn in a diagram with four phases ([Figure 1](#)).

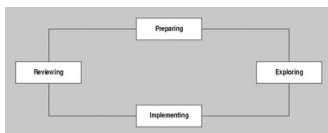


Figure 1: The four main phases of learning how to learn

Preparing for a section of study and an accompanying assignment is an essential part of the process. In this phase, you are encouraged to pause and think ahead about how and when you will tackle both studying the material and the assessment task itself.

Exploring is the phase when most of your studying is done, by both working through the course and preparing for the assignment.

Implementing covers the actual doing of your assignment - producing the assignment in a form that can be sent to your tutor.

Reviewing is the phase when your work is returned. Lessons from this phase may well help you in the next circuit as you prepare for another section of study and the next assignment.

So what should you actually do in each of these phases? Each can be divided into two activities ([Figure 2](#)), and we will look at them in turn in the following sections.

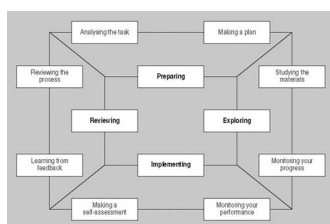


Figure 2: The eight activities of learning how to learn

4 The preparation phase

4.1 Preparing

In the preparation phase you should pause before starting a new section of work and think about it as a whole. What needs to be covered? What are the various components of this block of work? What are the learning objectives or outcomes? What will you need to know and be able to do at the end of it? What is required in the assignment?

There are two main activities during this phase, both directly related to your course work and assignment:

- analysing the task
- making a plan.

4.2 Analysing the task

This involves you in analysing both the **learning** task, (e.g. working through the text, other readings, calculations, experiments) as well as the assessed task (e.g. the assignment). It is important to work out from the start just what this part of the course requires you to do as well as to know.

Activity 5

Scan through your course material, looking at section headings, activities etc. Check any other components of the course you may have been provided with or directed towards. This could be other reading, audio-visual material, or electronic texts. Then look at the assignment. Take particular note of any guidance you've been given. This may have been given verbally by your tutor or in student notes. Also look at the criteria that will be used in marking it. If you have a choice of questions for your assignment, look at them all at this stage – it will also help you see what to expect and look out for as you study. Make notes as you compile this overview.

Here's Tim's list of what his next assignment requires:

What I need to know sounds really daunting - I've looked through the next assignment question and the advice. There are two parts to the question. This is what I need to know:

The basic elements of classical architecture

The form of the Colosseum - structure, decoration, shape

Its function - why it was built and what it was used for

The relationship between form and function

How far the functional needs were achieved in the design

What the Roman Games were all about

The reasons why they were important for the Romans

Some idea of the relative importance of these reasons (seems difficult, I think I will need to weigh things up - possible weakness)

What primary sources are

How they should be approached

How to decide which bits of the course material are relevant (I'm getting there but I do find it time-consuming)

How to structure the work (I believe I'm OK at this now)

How to answer the question within a tight word limit (a weakness)

How to be analytical rather than just descriptive (a definite weakness!)

Addition to skills audit completed earlier

I've looked back at the early skills audit that I did and I note that I need all the same skills again plus a few more for this assignment. I'll need to be able to synthesise the information. It's all there in the material but I've got to pick out the right bits and direct them to a particular question. I've also got to look at some detailed architectural drawings which are a bit like diagrams and understand the technical bits.

From the overview, you will get a good idea of what to expect in terms of content as well as an indication of what learning skills you may need. Pause for a moment and look back on previous parts of your course or other courses you have studied; or on earlier learning experiences that are relevant to the current task. This may help you identify your strengths and weaknesses as a learner. In what skills needed for this task are you particularly strong? What areas need improving? This analysis can be quite specific, perhaps based on feedback from previous assignments or, if the current task demands something new, only very general points from your previous learning may seem relevant.

To get an overview of what she had to do, Sue made a comprehensive analysis of what the next part of her course entailed and then looked in detail at the assignment that followed. Here are her notes on the assignment.

Assignment 7. Assignment booklet useful here as it tells me about:

- assessment strategy and the role of assessment in learning
 - subheadings in essays, spelling, diagrams and referencing
 - computer-marked assignment strategy and the role of formative and summative computer-marked assignments
 - tutor-marked assignment strategy and gives hints on things like sequence for setting out arguments in essays and why short answer questions are 'tiered'
 - marking strategy and explains why over 55% is good and over 70% is very good
 - skills expected and tested in the course
- a. understanding of key facts and concepts
 - b. clear, concise and coherent writing
 - c. interpretation of data from tables, charts and graphs
 - d. experimental design and analysis
 - e. integration of material from different parts of the course
 - f. interpretation of new data in relation to material in the course.

Assignment 7: 2 questions, Q1 = essay, Q2 = 4 parts.

- Q1: essay 'Compare and contrast psychoses and neuroses'. Answer in no more than 1200 words.
- It carries 50% of total marks for the assignment.
- It tells me that it refers mainly to book 6 material but information from other parts of the course may also be relevant.
- It tells me about marks to be deducted if I go over the word limit.
- Q2: A four-part question about Parkinson's Disease.
- Part (a) has 15% of total assignment marks; (b) = 10% (c) = 10% (d) = 15%.
- It tells me to refer to the tables in the Assignment Booklet. [Table 1](#) for part (b) [Table 2](#) for (c) and both tables for (d).
- It tells me that it refers mainly to book 6 material but information from other parts of the course may also be relevant.

4.3 Making a plan

How you respond to this suggestion will depend on what sort of person you are. Many of us are great planners with timetables and lists for every part of our lives; others just get on with the priorities and everything else follows in due course. Planning is no guarantee everything will get done or that deadlines will be met, but the process of making a plan makes you focus on what the task entails and gives direction and purpose to your study. Studying does demand that most students need to plan their work and there is evidence that target setting and appropriate planning can enhance performance.

Plans can be as general or as specific as necessary depending on your purpose and preference. Remember to take into account any awareness you have of your preferred ways of working - your learning skills, styles and strategies. The aim is to help you begin to understand what approach to learning really works best for you, in the context of the course you are currently studying and your personal circumstances.

An action plan can be just a list of things to do, a chart giving deadlines, a diagram showing how the various parts of your plan interact, or a set of post-its on a sheet of card that you move around when each task is done. If you break down the overall task into a series of smaller targets, you can chart your progress in more detail. It's useful to have a way of recording your progress as well as a way of listing any sources of help that you need. You can even customise one of the more sophisticated electronic planners - if that is your preferred way of working. **But do remember that your original plan may well have to be modified as you work towards your final target.**

Activity 6

Now, make yourself an action plan for your next assignment. You may like the design and layout of Tim's or Sue's action plans, or you may prefer to design one for yourself.

The format and the content of the plan should be one that suits you and the assignment for which you are preparing.

This action plan compiled by Tim covers his work on a section of the course, as well as setting targets for the completion of his assignment.

Target	What I need to do	With help from	Target date	Revised date	Date completed
Find out what the next assignment is about.	Read the question and student advice.	Bob Self-help group Tutor at tutorial	April 12		April 12
Gather material for both parts of essay.	Go through my notes extracting relevant bits. Check back through course course and margin notes in case there is anything to add.	TV programme might be useful.	April 13		April 13
Produce an essay plan for each part.	Put the points in order.	Discuss key points with Bob. Look in <i>Arts Good Study Guide</i> for advice on analysing.	April 13		April 13
Produce first draft of both parts.	Put my notes in some sort of order with an introduction and conclusion.		April 13	April 14	April 14
Produce final draft of part 1.	Edit to make sure that all the points are relevant; proof read for spelling and grammar 'blips'.	Self-help group meeting at pub.	April 14	April 15	April 15
Produce final draft part 2.	As above.	As above.	April 16	April 17	April 17
Meet assignment deadline: April 21.	Have final read through (just in case!) and post to tutor.	April 18	April 19	April 19	

Sue has a very disciplined approach to her work, with tight deadlines for her final assignment.

Main task: Submit my final assignment on time!

Target	Tasks	Target date
Book 6	(i) skim read	6 Sept
Assignment 6 (due in 15 Sep)	(i) finish and post	12 Sept
Assignment 7 (due in 2 Oct)	(i) check requirements	18 Sept

	(ii) select relevant sections	
	(iii) re-read	
	(iv) check graphs and tables	
	(v) extract data	
	(vi) make notes	
Assignment 7 Q1 (essay)	(i) draw up essay plan as grid	18 Sept
	(ii) include evidence and data	
Assignment 7 Q2	(i) re-read question and check understanding	22 Sept
	(ii) draft out answer to parts (a) to (c)	
	(iii) if necessary get help on (d)	
Assignment 7 Q1 (essay)	(i) DRAFT 1 of essay	22 Sept
	(ii) check word limit and	
	(iii) use red pen to cut down!!	
Assignment 7 Q2	(i) write final version of Q2	24 Sept
Assignment 7 Q1 (essay)	(i) DRAFT 2 of essay	27 Sept
	(ii) get someone else to read through and comment	
Assignment 7	(i) FINAL VERSION of essay	30 Sept
	(ii) post it!	

5 The exploration phase

5.1 Exploring

This is the phase when you will be studying your course material, using and developing your learning skills. The two activities of this phase are:

- studying the materials
- monitoring your progress.

5.2 Studying the materials

This is the period when you will be working on your course materials in preparation for the assignment. This may include working through written or electronic texts, any other associated reading or media components, possibly attending a tutorial, accessing any other information that you need and making notes or records of it. Some courses give you a lot of direct guidance on how to work through the course materials; others present you with a range of options and routes. Some courses, particularly those at higher levels, leave you to make the decisions about how to tackle your study. Take advantage of any advice offered but as you become more aware of how best you learn, you will be able to take increasing responsibility for your own learning.

As you study and prepare for the assignment, you may need to use skills or techniques in which you are less confident, possibly those identified during the preparing phase. If so, try to consciously work on the skills that need developing rather than struggling through course material, ignoring areas or activities you find difficult.

This is a good time to complete a skills audit.

Activity 7

Take a break from your work and have a look at the instructions for your next assignment. Make sure you read any student notes very thoroughly and take note of any advice your tutor provides. Really analyse the task(s) involved and identify the skills you will need to complete the assignment successfully. Then draw up and complete a form like the one shown in [Figure 3](#) or, if you prefer, devise one that suits you and the task.

Date	Estimate of my current level of skill				How do I know?	Skills for improvement				What might I do about it?
	1	2	3	4		1	2	3	4	

Figure 3: A form for completing a skills audit

Here is Tim's skills audit for the assignment he was planning. As you can see, he has identified a number of skills that the assignment requires and in most of these he feels fairly confident. But there is some material in this part of the course that is new to him and he knows he has problems with it. He decides to really work on the relevant skills because they are important for the assignment.

Skill	Estimate of my current level of skill					How do I know?	Priority for improvement				What might I do about it?
	1 low	2	3	4	5 high		1 low	2	3	4 high	
Reading			X			Coping OK but still find that part difficult in terms of maintaining concentration.			X		Look in the Arts Good Study Guide. Ask people on the FirstClass Conference what they do.
Note-taking				X		I can understand them when I start to plan my assignment.		X			I'll just keep practising pattern notes.
Gathering information for assignments		X				It takes ages - I end up going over all my notes plus the whole block again.				X	Bob has same problem. Look in Arts Good Study Guide again. Ask tutor - she said we shouldn't hesitate to phone if we have problems.
Assignment plan		X				Also takes ages - sifting through all that info.				X	As above - I must speed up a bit.
First draft				X		Once I've got the plan I seem to be reasonably OK. It doesn't take that long and I get positive comments from my tutor		X			If I can speed up the above then I expect this will take less time.

Being analytical	X		on my structure. Tutor says on PT3 my marks will improve dramatically once I get away from so much description.	X	Compare my last essay with Bob's. Ask self-help group if anyone's willing to let me look at their assignment when it's been marked. Look in Arts Good Study Guide. Edit draft carefully.	
Answering the question		X	Tutor wrote on PT3 that lack of analysis means that I don't fully answer the question.		X	Doing above should help with this.
Organising my time		X	Fit study in OK but underestimate time things take.		X	Hope above will help sort this problem. It all seems to be linked.

Sue has a very clear idea of where she needs to develop her skills and makes this a priority for her next assignment. Here is her skills audit.

Skill	Estimate of my current level of skill					How do I know?	Priority for improvement				What might I do about it?
	1 low	2	3	4	5 high		1 low	2	3	4 high	
understanding key facts and concepts			*			it often takes me a long time and I sometimes miss key points that are crucial			*		try other ways of going through the material; perhaps go to a learning skills workshop
clear writing				*		tutor tells me on assignments		*			keep at it

concise writing	*	tutor tells me on assignments	*	keep at it
coherent writing	*	tutor tells me on assignments	*	keep at it
interpreting data from tables	*	get put off if there are lots of numbers	*	practice, perhaps ask for session in tutorials
interpreting data from charts	*	I sometimes need to draw in lines to help me interpret histograms and bar charts	*	practice, perhaps ask for session in tutorials
interpreting data from graphs	*	if there are several lines on one graph I sometimes take ages to interpret them	*	practice, perhaps ask for session in tutorials
integration of material from different parts of the course	*	there's so much in the course it takes ages to go through it all in case I've missed something relevant	*	discuss with other students over phone or at tutorials
interpretation of new data in relation to material in the course	*	final part of tiered questions seems to test this and I find them the most difficult parts of assignments	*	ask tutor for help if stuck in understanding; ask for practice at tutorials; ask tutor for extra feedback on assignments

5.3 Monitoring your progress

Of all the components in the learning how to learn process, this is probably the most difficult. As you study, you need to make a conscious effort to monitor your progress while working on the course, always with the main task in view. This is where a flexible plan devised in the preparation phase can be revised, particularly if you meet a difficult patch. Knowing when help is needed and where to go for it is important, especially if you discover that your learning skills need improving. Sources of help may be formally

provided in the course materials, through your tutor or from an administrator. Check if there are any skills workshops or supplementary materials available (see Further reading and Other sources of help sections). Some courses offer help online - make sure you know what is available and make use of it. Other sources of help may be informal - other students, self-help groups, friends or colleagues. Major areas of difficulty, perhaps identified as you work through one part of the course or prepare an assignment, may have to be tackled at another time; ask your tutor what help is available.

All this is part of monitoring your progress as a learner and a student on a particular course. Try to take the time to review your progress, especially if your course has built in a 'pause for thought' or a review section. The emphasis of your monitoring should be on '**What** am I learning?' as well as '**How** am I learning it?'

Activity 8

You might like to record your progress as a learner as you work towards your next assignment. You can do this in any format that suits you - [Activity 4](#) gives you some points to consider and here are some further ideas.

Keep a learning journal for at least a week, recording:

- the timing of each study session
- the place of each study session
- what you were learning
- how you were learning
- what did and what didn't go well
- changes you might make in the future.

Try to rate each session on a scale of 1–10 (e.g. a rating of 1 if you feel it was a waste of time, 10 if you feel that it was really beneficial) and add a comment on why you gave it that rating.

At the end of a week (or longer) pause and look at your records.

Here are some comments from Tim who kept a detailed diary earlier in the course and now adds some scores to different activities to check on his progress.

Don't do daily diary now but note significant things. I'll just note my thoughts from looking at what I've written. Not very good at being honest about my skills but I'll have a go.

Journal is useful because it's clear that it makes me think about what's going on when I study, what works well and what doesn't. Where I work isn't a problem - no children around now! 10/10 I think for where.

I can see now that studying in the evening rates about 4/10 for me - a little is fine but I'm much better in the morning - 10/10 I think provided I take a break! I can now stop worrying about that.

Seeking help and talking things through with others and sharing ideas makes a huge difference because my note-taking rating has gone from 1/10 to about 6/10 or 7/10. I can still speed up a bit though. Still my notes look better now - less detail than I used to put.

Finding time is still a bit of a problem though - 6/10 perhaps. I tend to stick rigidly to my timetable but to be honest I could do a bit more early evening and at the weekends. On the other hand I think that I could be more efficient with the time I do use. I still need to

find a strategy that helps me to locate the right bits for the assignments - currently rating about 4/10. I panic and go back over everything! I want to get decent marks (not great at the moment) for my assignments and I'm trying to develop my analytical skills. I give myself 3/10 because I'm still too much into description.

The purpose of this activity is to monitor your progress as you are studying and, in this case, working towards the completion of an assignment. But keeping the diary and monitoring your study is only of use if you learn from it - i.e. if you use the information to improve **how** you learn. If you used a rating system, look again at the high and the low scores - when, how and why do you work well; when, how and why is your study less effective? Use this information to find ways of working that are more effective and efficient. You can also relate your diary to your plan ([Activity 6](#)) and your analysis of the task ([Activity 7](#)) since this might be a good time to check your progress and make any necessary changes.

Sue decided not to keep a diary at this point. She had kept brief notes earlier in the year while preparing her first assignment ([Activity 4](#)) but shift work and family responsibilities meant her schedules were irregular and always very tight. She said that good planning was important for her, even if only for a week or two in advance. So she decided to check out how well she kept to her action plan for Assignment 7 ([Activity 6](#)) by ticking off each stage and noting whether she kept to her target dates. As you can see, some tasks took longer than expected and she lost several days due to her son having time off school, but just managed to meet the deadline for her final assignment. Sue realised that her schedule was far too tight, especially for a final assignment and that, in future, she must allow time for unforeseen circumstances.

Here is Sue's amended action plan:

Target	Tasks	Target date	Date completed
Book 6	(i) skim read took much longer and needed to make notes	6 Sept	8 Sept
Assignment 6 (due in 15 Sep)	(i) finish and post very rushed	12 Sept	14 Sept
Assignment 7 (due in 2 Oct)	(i) check requirements	18 Sept	23 Sept
	(ii) select relevant sections		
	(iii) re-read	Martin ill and off school	
	(iv) check graphs and tables		
	(v) extract data		
	(vi) make notes		
Assignment 7 Q1 (essay)	(i) draw up essay plan as grid	18 Sept	23 Sept
	(ii) include evidence and data		
Assignment 7 Q2	(i) re-read question and check understanding	22 Sept	27 Sept
	(ii) draft out answer to parts (a) to (c)	got stuck - phoned tutor	

	(iii)if necessary get help on (d)		
Assignment 7 Q1 (essay)	(i)DRAFT 1 of essay	22 Sept	27 Sept Getting worried ...
	(ii)check word limit and		
	(iii)use red pen to cut down!!		
Assignment 7 Q2	(i)write final version of Q2	24 Sept	29 Sept
Assignment 7 Q1 (essay)	(i)DRAFT 2 of essay	27 Sept	30 Sept
	(ii)get someone else to read through and comment	no time for this	
Assignment 7	(i)FINAL VERSION of essay	30 Sept	1 Oct
	(ii)post it!		
	Just made it!		

6 The implementation phase

6.1 Implementing

This is the phase when you complete your assignment. In some courses and for some assignments, the exploring and implementing phases may merge or overlap; in other courses, considerable exploration is needed before the actual assignment can be done. If there are several parts to your assignment, part of your planning might be to move back and forth between exploring and implementing - studying for and then completing part of the question, then returning for more study before tackling the rest of the assignment. Again, find a pattern that best suits you and the task. The two activities in the implementing phase are:

- monitoring your performance
- making a self-assessment.

6.2 Monitoring your performance

As you move into actually doing the assignment, the emphasis on consciously trying to monitor how you are performing continues to be important. This involves checking your work **while you are working on the task** rather than waiting until you have almost completed it before you look back at what you have done. You may wonder why we place so much emphasis on monitoring what you are doing. The reason is that if you check regularly what and how you are doing and are aware of your progress and performance, you are less likely to lose sight of the task and more likely to make appropriate changes as you work. For example, part of monitoring your performance as you complete an assignment is to make sure you check and re-check any guidelines or criteria given any student notes or guidance you've received. **Even though you may have done this as part of your initial preparation and planning, it is very easy to lose sight of the question as you immerse yourself in study and then rush into producing the assignment.**

Advice in student notes and grading criteria are sometimes ignored by students who then cannot understand why their grades are disappointing. Sometimes students drift away from the question, forgetting any advice they may have read, so this is something you should focus on both before starting **and** while working on the task. If you are given the marking criteria against which you will be scored but find them difficult to understand, don't be afraid to ask your tutor for clarification so that you will know how to use the criteria to enhance your work.

Activity 9

Try to find time to pause and think about the **process** of actually producing the assignment. It will give you a real insight into how you demonstrate your learning and produce material for assessment. If you can keep notes as a running commentary

while you do this, it will give you an opportunity to review and possibly improve the process.

As part of a research project, some students were asked to keep a small tape recorder beside them to record their progress as they worked on an assignment. The evidence from the study suggested that the students involved may have gained as much from the experience as those responsible for the research.

Tim did his talking aloud on the phone to Jane, another student on the same course. Their tutor had suggested that the only way to become good at analysing poems and paintings was to practise doing it. Students were encouraged to pair up and do this regularly over the telephone in the lead-up to the final, compulsory assignment.

Right, now, as you know I've been a bit nervous about doing poems but I've written down the stages we agreed at our last meeting and tried to apply them. I've read it through several times and each time I jotted down a few notes in terms of what I think it's about. I think it's about a model who's upset at how unattractively she has been portrayed.

Right, count the lines - 14 - traditional for a sonnet. Whoops, I nearly forgot the title, oh, yes, perhaps she was a famous artist.

OK, next stage, the rhyme scheme. Oh, yes, it's ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Ah, good, although this is a modern sonnet it follows the traditional Shakespearean rhyme scheme. That gives me a clue to the next part of the process - the structure. Yes, after line 8 the tone changes, that's the 'turn' and the final two lines say something punchy to finish it off. Now I can see quite clearly that there are two ways to look at the structure - we can talk about the significance of that in a bit.

Now, I'll talk about the rhythm. I'm expecting it to follow the tradition for the Shakespearean sonnet - da da, da da, da da, da da, da da - yes, it does have 10 stresses for each line.

Now I'll look at that in relation to the punctuation. That's interesting, a pause after every line except line 7 - that makes a big point about how bad this woman makes her feel. Apart from that each line seems to make a statement on its own.

Good, now I've looked at the structure I'll have a go at the language. Alliteration - yes, in line 1 - all hard sounds where she feels ugly. That contrasts with the soft sounds in the second part where she feels beautiful. It's in the final line as well - I feel that the point is made strongly.

Oh, I nearly forgot - subject matter - does it follow the tradition? No, it's turned on its head! It not about adoration - quite the opposite.

I'm relieved that I've got so much out of this - a planned approach has made a huge difference to my nervousness about poems. I'm flagging a bit now though - can you help me to pull the language apart a bit more, please Jane?

Sue used a different coloured pen to jot down her thoughts as she completed her assignment.

- final assignment - good!
- end of course coming up - exam approaching! - panic!
- deadlines tight - no extensions on this assignment
- question 1 = essay - must check wording carefully - 'Compare and contrast' - draw up a grid I think to help note taking and essay planning
- mustn't forget examples to back up each point I make. Tutor said that's what gets good marks

- mustn't waffle
- too much information for word limit - red pen needed for drastic cutting
- Question 2 - these tables look complex. Need to work out what they mean. Think I've got it now. Ah - part (d) - not sure I understand what they mean here. Must try phoning tutor for hints.
- Tutor said part (d) designed to get me to think and a 'tiered' question like this is designed so that part (a) is straightforward and it works up to a 'challenging' final part. He's right there! Really need to think on this one.
- Think I've got it! Now I need to explain my reasons or I'll lose marks.
- ' Need to re-do essay in final version. Happier now. Fascinating topic - but so much information provided. Difficult to know if my selection is the most appropriate.

6.3 Making a self-assessment

The ability to self-assess your work is a critical skill for you to develop if you want to improve your performance. If you can assess your own work accurately and identify the gap between what is required and what you are producing, you are more likely to be able to close the gap. But making an accurate and honest self-assessment is not an easy skill to develop, even though it is crucial in learning how to learn. Some courses do ask you to self-assess your work and submit your comments as part of the assignment. If this is required by your course, take it seriously and think carefully about what you have produced. This is where you should definitely use the marking criteria if they are provided and your tutor will give you appropriate feedback on your comments. If your course does not require this, you could put together a self-assessment form for yourself, which your tutor may agree to have a look at for you. It's worth spending time on this as it will develop your own ability to self-assess.

Click 'document' to open and print figure 4 as blank template.

[Document](#)

Activity 10

When you are ready to send your assignment to your tutor, spend a few minutes completing a form like the one in Figure 4. If your tutor has not provided a form like this, you can reproduce it yourself by completing Part A and attaching a note asking your tutor to respond. You can attach Part B as a separate sheet or write the headings on the back of Part A.

Part A

Name _____

Assignment number _____

1 One or two things that I think I have done well or tried to do well:

2 One or two things that were difficult and I'm not too happy about:

3 My assessment of this piece of work:

4 I would especially like feedback on the following areas:

(a) Course related

(b) Skills related

5 Other comments or information I feel it is important that my tutor should know:

Please send this form with your assignment.
Complete the reverse side when it is returned.

Part B

6 My tutor's comments on this assignment:

7 My response to those comments:

8 Two things I am going to try to do next time:

(a)

(b)

Now file this form with the assignment and refer to it when you start work on your next one.
Then keep it to help with revision.

Figure 4: A form for your assessment of your assignment

If you take it seriously, completing the form is an important learning experience, so give yourself time to think about and complete each section. Trying to identify what you think you have done well is difficult but important. Use the form as part of a dialogue with your tutor who will then respond with feedback and advice. Building up this kind of dialogue will help you to learn from your assignments more effectively.

Here is Tim's form.

Name **Tim Sullivan**

Assignment number **2**

1 One or two things that I think I have done well or tried to do well:

I think I have structured this well.

I checked through and made sure that everything was related to the topic.

2 One or two things that were difficult and I'm not too happy about:

I'm still unsure about my analytical skills - I find it difficult to do this particularly with the literature.

3 My assessment of this piece of work:

I've read back through it and now I'm starting to worry that there's too much on one part of the question and not enough on the other. I can't spend any more time on it but the balance doesn't seem right.

4 I would especially like feedback on the following areas:

(a) Course related

Analysing.

(b) Skills related

I haven't spent enough time on getting the balance between the different parts of the question right. I'm spending ages on gathering the material and sorting it out - trying to get it down to something manageable.

5 Any other comments or anything that you feel it is important that your tutor should know:

I've got a promotion at work - I really need to try to cut down on the time I'm taking.

Please send this form with your assignment. Complete Part B when it is returned.

Here is Sue's form.

Name: **Sue Napier**

Assignment number **7**

1 One or two things that I think I have done well or tried to do well:

Q1 essay. Found it really interesting. Think I've structured it well and tried to include evidence for the points I've made.

2 One or two things that were difficult and I'm not too happy about:

Q1 essay. Found it difficult to keep within the word limit so I may have missed out important points in doing so.

Q2 part (d) difficult and I'm not sure I've got it right.

3 My assessment of this piece of work:

A bit rushed as I'm thinking of revision and the exam now.

4 I would especially like feedback on the following areas:

(a) Course related

Do I need to remember all the names and dates of studies for the exam?

(b) Skills related

Am I on the right lines in Q2 (d) interpreting new data in relation to what is in book 6?

5 Any other comments or anything that you feel it is important that your tutor should know?

My youngest is off school at the moment so study time is limited.

Please send this form with your assignment. Complete Part B when it is returned.

7 The reviewing phase

7.1 Reviewing

This phase takes place after a period of study and an assignment have been completed. It is when you focus on reviewing your performance on your assignment as well as the whole cycle of study you have just completed. The two activities of this phase are:

- learning from feedback
- reviewing the whole process.

7.2 Learning from feedback

This is actually quite a difficult thing for any student to do. It is most effective when your assignment is returned, but by then you may have moved on to the next part of the course. Even so, you do need to make time to re-visit your assignment when it is returned and take note of your tutor's comments. It is the one time when your tutor is able to give feedback and advice to you as an **individual** student so it is well worth taking time to really absorb their comments. Try to separate those that are about **what** you have included in your assignment from those about **how** you have presented it. Assignments that give you a clear indication of the criteria used in grading may enable you to learn more effectively from the assessment process, but some tutors explain their own criteria and you should note this carefully.

Even if you have now moved to a new topic, your tutor's comments may aid your revision of the topic. More importantly, there may also be immediate advice that you could act on and incorporate into your next and any future assignments, thus enhancing your grades. For students, a great deal of learning takes place through completing assignments and getting feedback from their tutor. This, like self-assessment, is a crucial part of the process of learning how to learn.

Activity 11

If you sent a form to your tutor, put aside some time to complete Part B when your assignment is returned.

Here is Tim's form, completed when he had read his tutor's comments on the assignment.

6 My tutor's comments on this assignment:

I got 58%.

What I wrote was well structured and coherent.

I could write less about the topic in a general way and spend more time with my focus on answering the question asked. For example I could have done more on 'compare and contrast' in order to make my essay more analytical.

Equal weight needed on discussion of both characters.

I should consider reading for a purpose - might save time and aid focus.
I could try to complete essay well before due date - spend more time on editing.

7 My response to those comments:

I must say that I felt a bit miffed about the 'focus' bit - a bit fed-up and worried that I'll never get to grips with the literature. I'm still having problems with the 'answering the question' bit. I do keep to the topic but I don't do all that I'm supposed to. I've swallowed my pride and looked back through script (not easy to do as I'm anxious to get on to the next bit rather than go back over mistakes). Can't really take issue with my tutor's comments. I've read Bob's essay - he got 75% and I do see that there was more focus and more balance. Thought about the 'reading for a purpose' comment and looked in the Arts Good Study Guide. I've been nervous about doing this - worried I'll leave something out. It's probably worth a try though - anything, rather than get so bogged down with material! I know I've been rushing the editing lately - it's because things are hectic at work. If I'm honest I sent both of my last essays off without spending enough time on the editing stage. The word limit is getting higher so I do need to take care. I've looked back over this course and I realise that I've had problems with selecting material for the essay right from the beginning. Despite my concerns, this has been time well spent.

8 Two things I am going to try to do next time:

- (a) Read the essay question and notes first, work out what I have to do and try to read with this in the back of my mind.
- (b) Try doing skeleton essay from my notes in order to get focus right (and not get bogged down in detail). Then go back to course units for examples, checks for accuracy etc.

Now file this form with the assignment and refer to it when you start work on your next one. Then keep it to help with revision.

Sue also sent her form to her tutor who wrote some notes in section 6 before returning her assignment.

6 My tutor's comments on this assignment:

Q1 essay: A very good essay, well structured and well written. You compared and contrasted well too, so full marks for style and presentation. Remember to back up all the points you make with evidence and, to get even more marks, explain why and how the examples you give are good ones in supporting the points.

Q2: Part (a) full marks.

Parts (b) and (c): have another look at the tables here. You needed to bear in mind the data missing for some patients.

Part (d) designed to get you to really think and apply what you have learned to new data. If, when you've had time to digest my comments you still are unsure, do phone me.

7 My response to those comments:

Q1: Really pleased with this. Drawing up the grid as an essay plan helped me compare and contrast rather than just describe and discuss.

Q2: Fair comments. Need more practice at this for future courses. Won't worry too much for exam though, as that is just computer-marked assignment-type and essays.

8 Two things I am going to try to do next time:

(a) Keep doing essay plans and reading the precise wording of the questions.

(b) Remember that short answer questions are graded in difficulty and change my thinking strategy for the later parts of them.

Now file this form with the assignment and refer to it when you start work on your next one. Then keep it to help with revision.

If you decided not to send a form to your tutor, you can still benefit from looking carefully at the feedback you have been given on your assignment. You could use the instructions below to review your assignment and your tutor's comments on it.

What to do when your assignment comes back: how to gain maximum benefit from it

Assignments are not designed only for assessment - although most of them are marked in some way, they can count towards a final continuous assessment score or grade.

Working on an assignment is an active learning process from which you can gain a great deal. It is important to maximise the value of this.

When tutors receive your assignments they don't just grade them: they are normally expected to give you feedback and advice which will help you to improve your performance.

To get full benefit from your assignment, you'll need to engage with their comments and respond to them. If you do get in the habit of doing this to all your assignments, you'll learn far more from the whole exercise.

TEN TIPS FOR WHEN YOU GET YOUR ASSIGNMENT BACK

1. You'll probably look first at the grade - most people do - and this may arouse some feelings:

- if you've done better than you expected, you'll feel relieved
- if it's worse than you expected, you'll feel disappointed
- if it's much lower than you anticipated, you might feel angry or insulted.

There's nothing wrong with these feelings but they will affect your learning, so put the assignment away until your next study session.

In your next study session, allow yourself about 20–30 minutes to work on it; do this even if you're now on to new work.

Read the feedback and comments from your tutor.

Make yourself read through each question, stopping to read the comments. Sometimes tutors put these on a separate sheet so you can refer to it as you read.

Mark (in a different coloured pen) your responses to what your tutor has written; anything you agree or disagree with; anything you don't understand.

When you've finished re-reading, think about the grade again. If you're still unhappy, make a note to ask about it.

Go back to the feedback and comments from your tutor and re-read it. Can you understand what your tutor is saying.

On a separate sheet of paper or at the end of the assignment write down one or two main points - pieces of advice; mistakes you see you made; things to remember - points which you need to bear in mind when you write the next assignment or when you revise for your exam.

Make a note of anything that still puzzles you; comments which confuse you; criticism you feel is unjustified etc.

Arrange to speak to your tutor about your work. Either take your notes or assignment to your next tutorial, or contact your tutor by phone or email.

Make sure you both have a copy of the assignment to refer to.

At the end of every assignment you should be able to identify at least one thing that will help you to improve your performance. Then file your notes away ready for revision.

Learning from feedback is probably the most critical activity in the process of learning how to learn. Continuous assessment is not just a mechanism for judging your performance as a student, it is also meant to be part of the process of learning. **But it can only contribute to learning how to learn if you, the learner, engage with this part of the process.**

7.3 Review the whole process

Before you file away your assignment and return to your current study, spend a little time reviewing the whole process of preparing, exploring, implementing and reviewing your assignment. Review **what** you did and **how** you did it in each of the four phases. Trying to identify just **one** thing that went well and **one** thing that you could have done differently can help you in your future study. Remember that your review should focus on the **process** of the preparation for, and production of, your assignment (i.e. how you might do it differently) and not just the **product** itself (i.e. how you might do it better).

Here are some comments from Tim.

I've dipped in and out of this course but I can see now that I could have gone through the whole thing a bit earlier. I really haven't made much effort to read through my tutor's comments until now - just a quick look at the feedback sheet I received - and I know that I've missed a lot. Pulling out my tutor's comments gave me something to focus on for my last assignment - I saved myself time and anguish over what to put in the essay and I got a better mark. I will certainly have a good look at my next assignment.

As you read through the description of the process with its four phases and associated activities, you probably felt that you might like to try some of them but that attempting to complete the whole process could be too demanding. That's fine - now you have a choice. You can decide to invest some time and effort in learning how to learn and therefore give the whole process a try as you start the next part of your course and prepare for the associated assignment. Or, you may choose to focus on one phase of the process and try the activities suggested just for that phase - perhaps preparing or reviewing. Possibly, you may decide that you want to really develop one or two components that seem particularly important for you. This may be because the activity is something you rarely do - like planning - and yet feel that it might make a difference to your work. Or, you may have

found some of the suggestions really interesting and decide to try them out for yourself - perhaps focussing on monitoring your progress and performance or attempting to self-assess your own assignments, and then trying to apply any relevant feedback from your tutor.

8 Learning from revision and examinations

8.1 Introduction

Once you have got a general understanding of the process of learning how to learn, and have tried applying it to an assignment, you may be able to see how the same approach can be applied to revision, exams or any other form of assessment at the end of your course. This section looks at how the four phases (preparing, exploring, implementing and reviewing) relate to revision and exams. You may want to remind yourself of the overall process by looking again at [Figure 2](#).

You might prefer to skim through this section at this stage and return to it as your exam gets closer. However, the skills and the strategies that you need to use during revision and in exams may be very different from those you use during your study of other course components, so do leave time to practise them. Again, you may decide to focus on one particular phase of the process as revision time approaches.

8.2 Preparing

Both activities in this phase - analysing the task and making a plan - are critically important when it comes to preparing for an exam. Start by gathering together everything you have been sent that relates to the exam or end-of-course assessment for your current course. Also collect any advice you have had in the past about exam preparation. But the really important thing at this stage is to try and obtain a specimen exam paper or any detailed instructions relating to your end-of-course assessment. Use this information to analyse the task. While you are looking at these documents, think through what it is that you are expected to do and look back at any previous experiences you have had that might be relevant to the task. This is particularly important in preparing for an exam. Activity 12 is designed to help you if your course has an examination.

Activity 12

Before you start any revision have a look at these questions. You can either note down your responses or, preferably, share them with another student or someone who will 'interview' you, listen to your responses and perhaps question you further. The object of this exercise is to recall how you have prepared for and performed in examinations previously. If you have not taken an exam before, think about how you will probably do it this year, instead. The list starts with a general question, focuses on revision and then on the examination experience, and ends with another general question.

Revision and examinations

1. How would you summarise your overall feelings about examinations?
2. About how long is your revision period - how long before the actual exam would you start revising?
3. What sort of pattern does your revision take - do you work in phases, small bits or longer periods?

4. How close to the exam do you revise - up to the night before or do you have a break?
5. How carefully do you plan or structure your revision - do you plan a detailed outline of what you will do or do you just start and work through?
6. If you need to memorise material, do you have any particular way of doing it?
7. Do you record material in any way - perhaps summarise it on cards or paper, or record it?
8. Do you try to include any new material while revising or stick with what you have already studied?
9. Do you try to re-organise your material - perhaps re-write notes, or select from different parts of the course?
10. Do you make use of back papers or practise actual questions?
11. What do you do on the night before and the morning of the examination?
12. What do you think and feel as you journey to the examination place?
13. Do you stand outside talking with others or stand alone?
14. Between going into the room and starting the examination do you have rituals such as where you place the things you've taken with you? Do you meditate, pray or practise relaxation?
15. Once the examination starts, do you have a particular pattern of work - of tackling the paper?
16. Do you have a problem with timing?
17. Do you check back through your work before the end?
18. What do you do immediately after the examination?
19. Do you contact other students or your tutor after the exam?
20. Looking back at the examination(s) you have taken, do you feel you have learned anything that has helped you, or might help you, to do better?

When you have answered the questions, make a list of what you feel are your main worries about examinations or what you find most difficult to cope with. Then you could:

- contact your tutor to ask for advice
- find out if there are any exam preparation workshops in your region.

Make another list of any good ideas you intend to try as you prepare for your next exam.

Depending on the task and format of the assignment, planning to complete an end-of-course assessment can be different from planning for an exam. Planning for an exam includes planning your revision too, while preparation for the end-of-course assessment may be more like preparing for one of your course assignments. Here scheduling is very important. The time between your last course assignment and the exam, or the end-of-course assessment cut-off date, will probably be short, so make detailed plans of how and when you will revise or prepare. Your tutor will probably give you some good advice.

8.3 Exploring

Although this sounds as though it may not seem very appropriate in the context of revision and exams, it is critically important that you re-explore the course as you do your revision or prepare your end-of-course assessment. Studying the materials is important as many exams and end-of-course assessments require you to step back and review the course as a whole as well as consider the component parts. This is where you may need different skills and strategies; so, try different ways of recording and remembering information.

Keep an eye on your schedule and monitor your progress as you work through your revision. If you are facing an exam, make sure you practise answering questions from the sample or back papers. If you are completing an end-of-course assessment, keep checking the requirements, the instructions and advice you have been given. Some end-of-course assessments ask you to do tasks that are quite different from earlier assignments.

8.4 Implementing

As with assignments, this is the phase when you actually do the task - sit the exam or produce the final version of your end-of-course assessment. This is where monitoring your performance is really important. For most students, the crucial thing in an exam is usually to monitor the timing. Unlike the production of an assignment, an exam is a timed test; so, you need to pace yourself appropriately. Most end-of-course assessments have no time constraints although you may find the deadline very tight. Again, monitor your performance carefully. But timing is not the only thing to monitor - check that you are answering the question asked; that your calculations are accurate, and so on.

You may remember that the second component of the implementing phase was to make a self-assessment. This may sound a strange thing to suggest in relation to exams. However, generally students do not get many opportunities to improve their performance in exams so, once the actual event is over, make yourself spend a short time trying to assess your performance before the details fade in your memory.

8.5 Reviewing

Undoubtedly this is the most difficult phase to apply to revision and an exam or to the preparation and production of an end-of-course assessment. Most of us heave a huge sigh of relief when it is all over and then try to put it out of our minds during the weeks while we wait for the results. When these arrive, it is very difficult to think back to the exam itself or revisit the details of the end-of-course assessment. With very little feedback to help, learning how to learn from exams or their equivalent is difficult.

It is also likely that you may have quite strong feelings about the results - delight, amazement, relief, disappointment, even despair. Whatever your reaction, remember that there are people who can help you review the process and advise you if you want or need to take action. More importantly, if you are continuing with another course and you really want to improve your learning, remind yourself that this is the best time to review both your revision period and your exam performance. Try to identify what you can learn from it that might help you to handle the process more effectively next time.

9 Learning how to become a reflective learner

9.1 Reflection and the four main phases of learning how to learn

If your course encourages this approach to learning, or if you have read other material on learning how to learn, you may have come across the term 'reflection'. Maybe you have been encouraged to reflect on your learning or on your assignments. In this course, we have deliberately not used the term until now. This is not because we think the term - or the process - is unimportant, but because it can seem vague and not particularly helpful to you as a learner. In fact, all the activities in this course have involved reflection of some kind. In this final section, we want to explore the meaning of the term and explain how it can help you in learning how to learn (Figure 5).

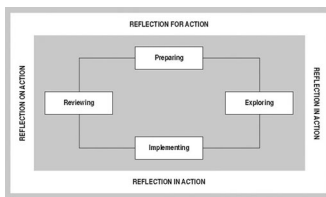


Figure 5: Reflection and learning

The **preparation** phase involves you in looking back as well as looking forward before embarking on a section of study within a course or perhaps the course as a whole. It encourages you to pause and think purposefully before moving on and has been described as **reflection-for-action**.

The over-arching emphasis of both the **exploring** and **implementing** phases is of being aware of **what** you are doing **while** you are doing it - often described as **reflection-in-action**. Such reflection needs to be **critical reflection** - asking yourself questions, checking your thoughts and actions, explaining to yourself (or others) why you are saying, writing, or doing things in this way. Reflection in action is difficult but becomes easier when carried out with another person who can listen to you talking through your work or reading what you have written.

The final **reviewing** phase closes the cycle; it overlaps with and leads into preparation for the next section of learning and assessment, or perhaps to revision and exams. This is a time for **reflection-on-action** to conclude the process. Look back over the **whole** learning experience and identify what you have learned from studying this part of the course and completing the assignment. The emphasis should be on both the **content** learned and **how** you learned it - this is the meaning of learning how to learn.

Courses are often very demanding in terms of time and some are overloaded. You may be tempted, especially in your first year, to struggle on, preoccupied with trying to keep up. It is hard to make yourself pause and consider how you are studying and learning even when course materials invite you to do so. In most courses there are natural breaks - at the end of a course or block of study as well as after the completion of an assignment.

These are designed to help you fit in time for reflection-on-action, a conclusion for the section of work you have just completed and a preparation for starting the cycle again with the next section of your coursework.

9.2 What is reflection?

Is reflection different to just thinking about your study? And how do we do it? Can someone teach you how to reflect or is it a matter of practice? Can everyone be reflective or are some students - and some people - more reflective than others?

There is no clear definition of reflection or precise way of describing what we mean by a reflective learner. But we can discuss some characteristics of the process, and encourage you to develop your own preferred ways of developing it.

Reflection is **thinking for a purpose** - in this course we have linked it to wanting to become a more effective and efficient learner; someone who wants to understand their own learning. Thus, reflection is also about wanting, or at least being willing, to change the way we learn.

Reflection is **analysing** how we learn - taking apart our own learning processes. The activities in this course are tools to help you do this. But reflection is also about **evaluating** how effectively we learn - making judgements on our own performance, and that is not always an easy or comfortable thing to do.

Most of all, reflection includes being **critical** - not in a negative or destructive way, but through rigorous questioning and deep probing into **what** and **how** we learn. Many people would say that the most important characteristic of an effective student in higher education is that they are capable of critical thinking - actively challenging both themselves and others.

For most of us, reflection becomes a more meaningful activity if it can be shared, either in a group or with another student. Putting your thoughts and ideas into words and getting a response from someone else, then perhaps listening to their reactions, makes the process more interactive and developmental. This interaction can be face-to-face or might be at a distance - by telephone or electronically. Even if you cannot easily engage with another student, any other person - friend or family - who is supportive of you as a student or shares your interest in learning might well enjoy sharing with you some of the activities in this course.

Sharing ideas about the activities means that you are more likely to engage with the material. If you prefer not to share your thoughts and experiences with others, or if talking about your learning is not possible, at least take time to respond to the activities in writing. The activities in this course do not have a 'right answer'. The examples from Tim and Sue show that students vary in the way they approach their learning and in how they reflect on its effectiveness. We hope that you have found time to record your responses and to act on them where appropriate. If you have read this far and have actively engaged in the process as we suggest, it is likely that you are well on the way to becoming a reflective learner.

Learning how to learn, however, is about more than reflection - it is about development and change. Understanding **how** you learn is just the first stage; taking action to develop yourself, to make changes and improve your learning is, like learning itself, an ongoing process. We hope that working through this course has at least encouraged you to start.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying Languages. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance, and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

10 Further reading and sources of help

10.1 Further reading

OU books

- *The Good Study Guide*, by Andrew Northedge, published by The Open University, 2005, ISBN 0 7492 59744
- *The Sciences Good Study Guide*, by Andrew Northedge, Jeff Thomas, Andrew Lane, Alice Peasgood, published by The Open University, 1997, ISBN 0 7492 341 1 3
- *The Arts Good Study Guide*, by Ellie Chambers and Andrew Northedge, published by The Open University, 1997, ISBN 0 7492 8745 4

Other books

- *Writing at University: A guide for students*, by P. Creme and M. R. Lea, published by Open University Press, Buckingham, 1997
- *Reading, Writing and Reasoning: A guide for students*, by G. J. Fairbairn and C. Winch, published by The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press, Buckingham, 1996
- *A Guide to Learning Independently*, by L. Marshall and F. Rowland, published by Open University Press, Buckingham, 1996
- *Calculating and Computing for Social Science and Arts Students*, by R. Solomon and C. Winch, published by Open University Press, Buckingham, 1994

10.2 Other sources of help

Websites

[/www.open.ac.uk/goodstudyguide](http://www.open.ac.uk/goodstudyguide)

This Open University site is a companion site to the Good Study Guide series of books.

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