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# Developing Study Skills

# http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/files/2015/03/books-blogs.jpg

# Study skills are the skills you need to enable you to study and learn efficiently – they are an important set of transferable life skills.

# **Key points about study skills:**

# You will develop your own personal approach to study and learning in a way that meets your own individual needs. As you develop your study skills you will discover what works for you, and what doesn’t.

# Study skills are not subject specific - they are generic and can be used when studying any area. You will, of course, need to understand the concepts, theories and ideas surrounding your specific subject area. To get the most out of your studies, however, you’ll want to develop your study skills.

# You need to practise and develop your study skills.  This will increase your awareness of how you study and you’ll become more confident.  Once mastered, study skills will be beneficial throughout your life.

# Study skills are not just for students.  Study skills are transferable - you will take them with you beyond your education into new contexts. For example, organisational skills, time management, prioritising, learning how to analyse, problem solving, and the self-discipline that is required to remain motivated.  Study skills relate closely to the type of skills that employers look for.

# [**Getting Organised to Study**](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/organise-study.html)

# Getting yourself organised so that you can study effectively is an important first step in [study skills](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/study-skills.html).

# The information on this page may seem obvious to you but many people overlook the obvious and attempt to ‘jump straight in’ to study without planning and organising appropriately.

# For your study time to be effective it is recommended that you find a suitable place to study.  You should then make sure you have easy access to the tools and resources that you need to study.

# **A Place to Study**

# Finding a suitable place to study can be a challenge for some people, you may be lucky enough to have easy access to a library, university, college or school facilities or a quiet office at work.

# However, many people study at home - often home is not conducive to effective study.  Take some time to understand your personal requirements in terms of location and conditions that enable you to study effectively; try to maintain a flexible and adaptable approach as your situation or circumstances may change during the course of your study.

# Different people vary considerably in their circumstances and in the way in which they study most effectively.  When starting a programme of study, or when reviewing your current circumstances, it may be useful to ask yourself the following questions:

# Will you be studying mainly from home or ‘on location’ at your school, workplace, library or somewhere else?

# Do you have a choice in your study location or will your personal circumstances dictate this?

# Do you study better in a peaceful setting, one which is free from interruptions, or do you prefer to have others around you, perhaps being able to interact with family, friends, colleagues or peers?

# **Considering your Study Environment**

# When choosing a study location it is important that you make the best use of your time.

# To do this you will need to find a place where you can have all your materials: notes, books, timetable, writing materials and computer to hand.  It may not be practical to always have a computer available, especially if you are studying in a family setting, maybe you have shared access to a computer?  In such situations you should consider the time of day when you will be studying and have access to a computer when needed.

# There are other practical things to take into account when thinking about where to study.

# A good source of light, such as an adjustable lamp is important, especially if you intend studying into the evening or in an environment without much natural light.

# You should also think about distractions and annoyances that may be present and try to eliminate them as much as possible.  It is generally useful if everything that you might need is within easy reach of your chair, this can save unnecessary moving around and distractions while you try to concentrate.

# When you first start to study you may well overlook important environmental factors or tools that you need – the more you study the clearer you’ll become about what you need and where you need to be for optimum concentration.

# **Organising Your Materials**

# While thinking about your place of study, some thought should also be given to organising.

# There will, inevitably, be increasingly large amounts of printed material such as notes, books and journals.  Try to keep your materials organised in suitably indexed files, making use of a system of labelling that is clear, bold and easy to read at a glance.

# A simple filing system is often overlooked, especially by new students, but it can help you to save a lot of time.

# Be organised and file your materials - instead of sifting through piles of papers

# **When to Study**

# Deciding where to study is an important first step, equally important is determining the best times to study.  The following questions will help you to think about when to study:

# On a weekly basis, how many time slots will be available for you to use?

# Could more time be made available if necessary?

# How will you achieve a positive work/study/life balance?

# How will you manage your workload to meet the required deadlines?

# Is there a set pattern to when you study each week?

# What time of day will you study?  What time of day do you find it easiest to concentrate?

# What is the optimum period of time in which you are able to maintain concentration?

# What will you do to avoid or minimise interruptions when you are studying?

# How will you deal with interruptions if (and when) they occur?

# If you are unable to study as planned how will you ‘catch up’?

# Being able to research and use materials which back up your study or offer different interpretations of your study area is an essential aspect of studying and learning.

# Primarily you need to be aware of where to look for information, how to access it and how to use it.  You must also be able to scrutinise your sources to check that they are relevant and of a suitable nature to be included within your work.

# **Finding Information**

# **You may assume, automatically, that academic text books are the primary source of information when you are engaged in a formal study programme.** This may be true, to a degree, usually there is little need to question the credibility of such texts – they have probably been recommended by a tutor.  There are, however, many other sources of information which should not be overlooked.  Such sources include: the internet, newspapers, journals, transcripts from radio or TV programmes, leaflets, photographs and other artefacts (man-made objects).

# Within the category of books there are many different types and genres, for example: fiction and non-fiction, including dictionaries, encyclopaedias, biographies, almanacs, archives, yearbooks and atlases, to name just a few.  There are even more categories of websites and other internet resources.  All sources of information can be of relevance depending on the subject matter of the research or project you’re working on.

# It is important to understand that all information will have a certain degree of validity or otherwise.  A document can be easily forged or altered, especially on the internet where anybody can publish anything.  It is therefore necessary to use judgement when deciding which documents to use in the context of your study.

# **Secondary Documents**

# **A secondary document is written after an event - usually the authors will not have witnessed the event themselves.**  Such documents are usually written with reference to primary documents and attempt to provide an interpretation.  Core texts - academic texts related to the topic being studied - are an example of secondary documents.  In current affairs a secondary source would be a standard news story.  A story that has been reported after the event.  As a secondary source is a writer’s interpretation of what happened (a primary source) it is more likely to contain observations, bias and subjective commentary that try to explain the event and put it into some sort of context.

# **Tertiary Documents**

# **Tertiary documents usually act as pointers to primary and secondary documents.**  They are indexes, directories, bibliographies and other categorised collections of information - documents that you can turn to and be guided to other, potentially relevant, documents on a particular subject.  For example, checking the bibliography of books can help to lead you to further research material or to looking at a list of similar stories on a news website.

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# **Internet Sources**

# There is a phenomenal amount of information available online, via web-pages, blogs, forums, social media, catalogues and so on.  As there is so much information available and because such information can be published quickly and easily by anybody and at any time, it is important that you are vigilant in choosing reliable sources.

# For many subjects the internet can be a very important place to research.  In some disciplines the internet may be the most appropriate - or only - way of gathering information.  This can be particularly true of subjects related to technology or current affairs.  Whenever you use the internet for research, remember that the authorship, credibility and authenticity of internet documents is often difficult to establish.  For this reason you need to be vigilant and take care when using the internet for academic research.

# **Part Two**

# Writing Skills

# Writing skills are an important part of communication.

# Good writing skills allow you to communicate your message with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than through face-to-face or telephone conversations.

# You might be called upon to [write a report](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/report-writing.html), plan or strategy at work; write a grant application or [press release](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/press-release.html)

# Poor writing skills create poor first impressions and many readers will have an immediate negative reaction if they spot a [spelling](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/spelling.html) or [grammatical mistake](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/grammar1.html).

# **Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation**

# Correct grammar, punctuation and spelling are key in written communications. The reader will form an opinion of you, the author, based on both the content and presentation, and errors are likely to lead them to form a negative impression.

# If you are unconvinced about the importance of accurate writing, think of the clues we use to identify spam emails, “phishing” websites, and counterfeit products: poor grammar and spelling.

# Similarly, some employers state publicly that any [CV or résumé](http://www.skillsyouneed.com/write/cv-resume.html) containing spelling or grammatical mistakes will be rejected immediately. Checking for poor writing and spelling mistakes should be seen as a courtesy to your readers since it can take them much longer to understand the messages in your writing if they have to think and re-read text to decipher these.

# All written communications should therefore be re-read before sending to print, or hitting the send button in the case of emails, as it is likely that there will be errors.  Do not assume that spelling and grammar checkers will identify all mistakes as many incorrect words can indeed be spelt correctly (for example, when “their” is used instead of “there” or “principle” instead of “principal”) or entire words may be missing. If at all possible, take a break before re-reading and checking your writing, as you are more likely to notice problems when you read it fresh.

# Even if you know spelling and grammar rules, you should still double-check your work or, even better, have it proof-read by somebody else. Our brains work faster than our fingers can type and accidental typographical errors (typos) inevitably creep in.

# **Improving Your Writing Skills**

# The good news is that writing is a skill which can be learned like any other. One trick for checking and improving your work is to read it aloud. Reading text forces you to slow down and you may pick up problems with the flow that your eye would otherwise skip over.

Another way to improve your writing skills is by READING. As you read, you engage with different writing styles

# Find out more here:

# <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/effective-reading.html>

# <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/learn/styles-writing.html>

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# **Writing in the Workplace**

Being able to write well is a skill which will get you a long way in the workplace, partly because it is fairly rare in many places.

One skill that many people lack, especially in management and other professional environments is the ability to write in plain English. That is avoiding unnecessary jargon, industry specific buzzwords and clichés and keeping sentences short and concise.

Taking the time to polish your writing skills is likely to pay off in the longer term, and learning how to write specific types of documents will also be useful.

**How to Write a Report**

Some academic assignments ask for a ‘report’, rather than an essay, and students are often confused about what that really means.

Likewise, in business, confronted with a request for a ‘report’ to a senior manager, many people struggle to know what to write.

Confusion often arises about the writing style, what to include, the language to use, the length of the document and other factors.

## **What is a Report?**

In academia there is some overlap between reports and essays, and the two words are sometimes used interchangeably, but reports are more likely to be needed for business, scientific and technical subjects, and in the workplace.

Essentially, a report is a short, sharp, concise document which is written for a particular purpose and audience. It generally sets outs and analyses a situation or problem, often making recommendations for future action. It is a factual paper, and needs to be clear and well-structured.

Requirements for the precise form and content of a report will vary between organisation and departments and in study between courses, from tutor to tutor, as well as between subjects, so it’s worth finding out if there are any specific guidelines before you start.

**Reports may contain some or all of the following elements:**

* A description of a sequence of events or a situation;
* Some interpretation of the significance of these events or situation, whether solely your own analysis or informed by the views of others, always carefully referenced of course
* An evaluation of the facts or the results of your research;
* Discussion of the likely outcomes of future courses of action;
* Your recommendations as to a course of action; and
* Conclusions.

Not all of these elements will be essential in every report. If you’re writing a report in the workplace, check whether there are any standard guidelines or structure that you need to use.

### **Sections and Numbering**

A report is designed to lead people through the information in a structured way, but also to enable them to find the information that they want quickly and easily.

Reports usually, therefore, have numbered sections and subsections, and a clear and full contents page listing each heading. It follows that page numbering is important.

Modern word processors have features to add tables of contents (ToC) and page numbers as well as styled headings; you should take advantage of these as they update automatically as you edit your report, moving, adding or deleting sections.

The structure of a report is very important to lead the reader through your thinking to a course of action and/or decision. It’s worth taking a bit of time to plan it out beforehand.

#### **Step 1: Know your brief**

You will usually receive a clear brief for a report, including what you are studying and for whom the report should be prepared.

First of all, consider your brief very carefully and make sure that you are clear who the report is for (if you're a student then not just your tutor, but who it is supposed to be written for), and why you are writing it, as well as what you want the reader to do at the end of reading: make a decision or agree a recommendation, perhaps.

#### **Step 2: Keep your brief in mind at all times**

During your planning and writing, make sure that you keep your brief in mind: who are you writing for, and why are you writing?

All your thinking needs to be focused on that, which may require you to be ruthless in your reading and thinking. Anything irrelevant should be discarded.

As you read and research, try to organise your work into sections by theme

Make sure that you keep track of your references, especially for academic work. Although referencing is perhaps less important in the workplace, it’s also important that you can substantiate any assertions that you make so it’s helpful to keep track of your sources of information.

**The Structure of a Report**

Like the precise content, requirements for structure vary, so do check what’s set out in any guidance.

However, as a rough guide, you should plan to include at the very least an executive summary, introduction, the main body of your report, and a section containing your conclusions and any recommendations.

**Summary**

The summary or abstract, for a scientific report, is a brief summary of the contents. It’s worth writing this last, when you know the key points to draw out. It should be no more than half a page to a page in length.

Remember the executive summary is designed to give busy 'executives' a quick summary of the contents of the report.

#### **Introduction**

The introduction sets out what you plan to say and provides a brief summary of the problem under discussion. It should also touch briefly on your conclusions.

#### **Report Main Body**

The main body of the report should be carefully structured in a way that leads the reader through the issue.

You should split it into sections using numbered sub-headings relating to themes or areas for consideration. For each theme, you should aim to set out clearly and concisely the main issue under discussion and any areas of difficulty or disagreement. It may also include experimental results. All the information that you present should be related back to the brief and the precise subject under discussion.

Remember: If it is NOT relevant, Leaver it out

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#### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The conclusion sets out what inferences you draw from the information, including any experimental results. It may include recommendations, or these may be included in a separate section.

**Recommendations**

Suggest how you think the situation could be improved, and should be specific, achievable and measurable. If your recommendations have financial implications, you should set these out clearly, with estimated costs if possible.

### **A Word on Writing Style**

When writing a report, your aim should be to be absolutely clear. Above all, it should be easy to read and understand, even to someone with little knowledge of the subject area.

You should therefore aim for crisp, precise text, using plain English, and shorter words rather than longer, with short sentences.

**You should also avoid jargon.**

If you have to use specialist language, you should explain each word as you use it. If you find that you’ve had to explain more than about five words, you’re probably using too much jargon, and need to replace some of it with simpler words.

**Consider your audience.**

If the report is designed to be written for a particular person, check whether you should be writing it to ‘you’ or perhaps in the third person to a job role: ‘The Chief Executive may like to consider…’, or ‘The minister is recommended to agree…’, for example.

**Finally**

ASK yourself: “Does my report fulfil its purpose.