



# Evidence-based study, exam prep and writing tips

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# EVIDENCE-BASED STUDY, WRITING AND EXAM PREPARATION TIPS

One of the most significant (and obvious) sources of stress for students is the academic workload.

Many students find the shift from high school or working life to University to be quite challenging.

One of the things that can help students adapt to the academic requirements of university is establishing good study habits.



In this handout (which grew from this blog post <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/09/05/good-student-academic-stuff/>), we explore some of the most reliable and effective study methods.

For additional help with the academic side of University, see the wonderful people over at the Student Learning Centre - <http://www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/slc/>

Also make sure to take advantage of the Studiosity service for help with your essay and assignment writing via draft assignment feedback and live chat - <http://www.flinders.edu.au/current-students/slc/studiosity.cfm>

## Start by asking yourself these questions

Before you dive into the strategies below, ask yourself the following questions:

1. *How do I study?*
2. *Why do I study this way?*
3. *Does it work?*

Answering these questions will focus your attention on your unique study habits. We all have our own way of studying and preparing for exams. Some of these habits will be effective. Some will not. What you are looking to do is retain the good habits whilst incrementally developing new efficient habits. Taking the time to reflect on your current habits will help, as you peruse the suggestions below.

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## Set yourself up for success

Even before you open up your books, there are a bunch of things you can do to set yourself up as a more effective learner.

1. **Healthy brain** – if you abuse your brain with poor sleep, poor nutrition, limited physical activity and excessive drug and alcohol use, it will not reward you with being smart and capable. Does this mean you need to be a saint? Of course not, but if you want high performance, look after that big grey lump between your ears through attending to the basics of self-care (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/06/20/self-care-mega-guide/>). If you can get the **trio** of regular sleep, healthy diet and regular physical activity in place, you've got an excellent base formula for wellbeing and performance (and longevity as well).
2. **Attitude** – your attitude is the sum total of your beliefs. If you believe that your abilities are fixed, that study always requires motivation and confidence, that confusion and setbacks are unbearable, and that everything you do must be perfect, you'll likely find study to be an aversive experience and may find yourself procrastinating and avoiding it. However if you acknowledge that you can always improve, that action breeds motivation and confidence, and that confusion and setbacks are a normal (and useful) part of the learning process, your attitude towards study will be much more realistic and helpful - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2017/08/10/fixed-vs-growth-mindsets/>
3. **Get organised** – this means schedules and to-do lists and all that fancy stuff that the nerdy students do. This is even more important if you have a lot of people or things demanding your time (family, work, responsibilities, other roles). Remember that a full-time degree = full-time work. You should be doing the equivalent of 7.5 hours of study per day (including lectures and tutorials). This can be a shock to the system if you've come from high school, because you go from a tightly controlled environment into one where your time is controlled by **you**, not the school. So you will have to learn to organise yourself. For a look into time management, check out this blog post I wrote recently - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2020/04/24/principles-of-time-management/>
4. **Set up a nice + efficient study space** – <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2018/07/11/create-study-space-makes-want-study/> Sounds trite I realise, but the environment in which we exist exerts a powerful impact on our mood and behaviour. For example, we know that even just 5 minutes in nature can reduce a person's stress levels. Your study space **will** influence how you study. A good study space

is physically comfortable, has everything you need to study, low distraction, uncluttered and uniquely you.



THIS IS MY STUDY SPACE

5. **Set goals** – You need to have something that you are working towards. Goals come in all shapes and sizes. Set yourself some big goals ('be the best engineer ever') as well as some practical short-term ones ('study for at least 3 hours each day'). When it comes to learning new stuff, set yourself a mix of performance goals (e.g. "I want to get Credits or above for all my topics this semester") as well as mastery goals (e.g. "I want to learn all about the different areas of the brain this semester").
6. **Visualise** – each day wake up and visualise the end of the semester and having done well. Also visualise the day ahead and imagine having a productive day of study, lectures and tutorials. Counter-act doubts and self-criticism by imagining yourself as a successful student, coping with the workload and work complexity. Just visualising something doesn't magically make it happen (I've been visualising myself looking like Chris Hemsworth to no avail), but visualisation focuses your brain on the desired outcomes and the steps needed to get there. Negative visualisation can also be helpful: namely visualising the outcome you don't want to happen (e.g. fail topic, not get degree etc). Combined, the two types of visualisation help you imagine the life you want and the life you don't want.
7. **Remember how memory works** – In the sections below, I make a distinction between getting material into your head and then getting it out again. This reflects that memory involves both processes – encoding and retrieval. Both processes are necessary to develop strong memories. Encoding means taking new information and attaching it to existing knowledge. Our brains aren't like hard drives, storing data in original form. Instead our brains connect new information to existing knowledge. Hence why many of the encoding strategies involve in-depth processing of new information (connecting it to things). But encoding is only half the picture. We also need to regularly practice retrieving that information from our memory in order to strengthen it. This is why self-testing is such a powerful learning tool.

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## Making the most of lectures and tutorials

**First** – do any pre-readings or watch any videos that have been provided prior to the lecture if possible. Research on 'flipped courses', where students learn some of the material before the lecture/class have shown that this approach can improve exam performance. This is because it increases your interest in the material, primes you to learn more complex content and can help you develop more sophisticated questions about what you are learning.



(<https://www.lifescied.org/doi/pdf/10.1187/cbe.19-05-0094>)

**Second** - turn up at lectures and tutorials. Yes, you can get a lot of it 'online' after the event, but honestly, the self-discipline to rock up and attend lectures (even if that means attending them live for students who are entirely online) is a good predictor of whether you'll do well overall.

Also, recorded lectures sometimes don't capture discussions or important visual cues used by the presenter. Recorded lectures are however excellent for revision, for those who struggle with English or those who are fitting study around a tight work schedule. Watch them at [increased speed](#) for more rapid learning.

**Third** – take notes, hand-written or computer, even if you are provided with handouts. Annotate them, add extra stuff. Just make sure you are actively trying to take the key concepts of the lecture/tutorial and writing/typing them down. Use a defined system if it helps. You can read about different note taking systems here - <https://collegeinfo geek.com/how-to-take-notes-in-college/>. If taking notes on a computer, discipline yourself NOT to try to multitask at the same time (e.g. checking Facebook, email).

**Fourth** – review those notes after the lecture/tutorial (perhaps a day later) and expand on them. Add content that you remember but didn't write down at the time. Think about how what you learned in this lecture relates to previous lectures, to other related topics, maybe even to your own life. Try to use your **own words** when summarising stuff. This forces you to process the content before summarising it as opposed to simply parroting it 🐦

**Fifth** – ask questions, inquire further. Don't contact lecturers in the middle of the night with your crazed energy-drink ramblings, but within normal office hours, lecturers and tutors are generally happy to answer questions if you've engaged with the material and have some thoughtful reflections on it.

**Sixth** – avoid multi-tasking. Trying to do something else whilst also trying to participate in a lecture or tutorial is a sure-fire way to do both of them badly. When you are studying, stick to studying. And before you try to convince me that you, of all humans, actually can multi-task - <https://www.apa.org/research/action/multitask>

What are some ideas from what you've already read in this document that you might consider adding to your existing study habits?

## Getting all that material **into** your head

So you've got lecture notes, tutorial notes, assigned readings – all of which need to get into that big noggin of yours. Don't worry though, your brain has enough space for it all, as long as you feed it in appropriately. Let's take a look at how that is best done.



**Study less but with greater intensity** – you can't increase the number of days in the week, or hours in the day, but you can remove distractions and avoid multi-tasking so that your study periods are more intense and focused. Part of this is about removing distractions from your study space. Part of this is about working in concentrated chunks, with spaces in between for rest and recuperation. Try the Pomodoro technique to divide your study time -

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro\\_Technique](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_Technique)

**Reading** – is good. Read each item at least 2 to 3 times but any more than that has diminishing returns. During the 2nd or 3rd read you should be making notes and converting key concepts to flash cards or similar. If you can do all of this offline (pen, paper) that would be good, but that is not always possible. Try the Read, Recite, Review method...

## 3

### Read, Recite, Review Read, Recite, Review Read, Recite, Review

*A more significant and efficient way to study*



#### Read

- Read a passage, term, or concept that you need to memorize
- Remember to CHUNK study time, don't cram



#### Recite

- Recite out loud all of what you can remember
- Recall the information out loud to yourself, a friend, or even your dog!



#### Review

- Read the passage, term, or concept that you need to memorize *again*
- Make notes of any information you couldn't recall

#### READ, RECITE, REVIEW

**The 3R Method had been shown to improve performance**, relative to re-reading only and note taking.  
**SAVE TIME** – Use the 3R Method when you are exercising, waiting in line, walking to class, and so on.

Adapted from the Read-Recite-Review Study Strategy: Effective and Portable  
McDaniel, Howard and Einstein (Psychological Science, 2009)

Or the similar SQ3R method

## SQ3R Method by Francis P. Robinson



### S

#### 1. Survey

Scan the text and pay attention to:

- Layout;
- Chapters;
- Sections;
- Graphs;
- Pictures;
- Highlighted words;

### Q

#### 2. Question

Ask yourself questions about the text.

Ask yourself what you already know about the text and what your goal is.

Try to understand what it is that the author wants to convey.

### 3

#### 3. Read

Read the text actively while keeping the previous steps in the back of your mind. Write down additional questions and try to answer asked questions.

#### 4. Recite

Repeat (aloud) in your own words what you have read. Ask your self questions about the text, explain to someone what you have read and try to write a summary.

### R

#### 5. Review

Read all the relevant parts again. Go through your notes and questions again. Pay extra attention to the parts you find difficult.

**Underlining and highlighting** – are fine, but they don't really help with memorising stuff. They are simply methods to mark content that should be read again, summarised/noted, or added to a flash card. They are a way of marking important content, but don't really improve learning of that content directly.

**Taking notes** – is important. Use your own words (paraphrasing) to capture the key concepts. Having to explain something in your own words requires you to have processed the meaning more precisely. Use bullet points to extract key facts/equations/dates etc. Again, if you want to use a specific system for note-taking or feel your existing note-taking system is bad, read about options here - <https://collegeinfo geek.com/how-to-take-notes-in-college/>

**Develop questions** – Use your notes to develop questions that a) you can ask of lecturers or tutors, b) you can use for developing flashcards (see next point), or c) guide you in exploring the topic further (i.e. do further reading). As an example, if you've just learned the names of the first 20 elements from the periodic table of the elements, then consider asking yourself 'how are each of these used in modern life?' to guide further exploration. See this article on knowledge-telling vs knowledge-building - <https://effectiviology.com/knowledge-telling-knowledge-building/>

Escape Conditioning	Give a real life example of this concept
Limited Hold (LH)	Why is knowledge of this concept useful to you?
Extinction	Draw this concept

**Develop flash cards** – flash cards are bite-sized chunks of information, written on cards that are ideal for learning and self-testing – <http://www.learningscientists.org/blog/2016/2/20-1?rq=flashcards>. You can build a set of flash cards for each chapter/paper that you read, that are built on your notes, as well as the questions you've developed. Scott Young has a good article on how to make them as useful as possible - <https://www.scotthyong.com/blog/2021/04/26/do-flashcards-work>

**Space your readings over time (distributed practice)** - Say you have a chapter to read and learn. Instead of reading it 3 times and making notes/flashcards in a single sitting, do it over a couple of sessions. Then revisit those notes/ flashcards repeatedly over the course of the semester. Regular spaced study sessions are better than single massed study sessions. Studying something 3 times over a few weeks, is better than 3 times in a single day. I find a similar pattern when trying to write something. Rather than trying to thrash out a piece of writing in 6 hours, I instead space it over a few days (3 x 2 hours) so that I get time between for my brain to achieve new insights.

**Read something from each topic every day (interleaving).** Mix up your study sessions to include content from multiple topics. Being able to move from one topic to another will help you draw connections between the topics, but also train your brain to be



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able to move between topics with greater ease. Don't confuse this with multi-tasking though. Only ever do one thing at a time but divide your time between topics. For example, in a 2-hour study session, you might devote 35 minutes to 3 topics, with 5-minute breaks in between.

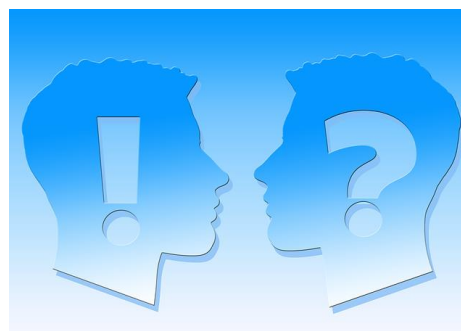
**Attach facts to stories/ worked examples/ your own life** – Some facts or concepts are easier to remember if you can attach them to a) worked examples, b) stories or c) your own life. Look for where you can attach a fact/concept to something more memorable. In psychology this was quite easy cause whenever we learned about a different psychological disorder, I could think about someone in my life who I could diagnose with it :)

**Interrogate facts** – Reading something that you need to remember? Try being an annoying child and ask a lot of 'why?' questions. The process you go through to answer these questions will give you a deeper understanding of the fact, which helps it stick in your head.

**Connect new material to existing material** – The more knowledge you already have on a topic, the easier it is to learn new knowledge in that area ('the rich get richer'). If you've already studied a bit of engineering, the easier it will be (generally) to acquire new knowledge about engineering. You can enhance this effect by trying to relate new knowledge you are gaining to existing knowledge you already have in the area. For example, if you are learning about a new medical diagnosis, see if you can identify its relationships with other diagnoses that you already know.

**Pre-testing** – Before sitting down to revise what you covered in your lectures or tutorials, consider pre-testing yourself (i.e. what you have retained from the lectures) using some past quizzes or tests. This primes your brain to know what needs to be revised.

**Explain stuff to yourself** – When I am trying to wrap my head around a difficult concept, I practice explaining the concept to myself when I am in the car driving – as though I was giving myself a presentation. It might look a bit weird to those people driving near me who see a crazed hairy man talking to himself, but as my explanations get better and clearer, my understanding of the concept improves as well. A variant on this is to try to explain the concept to a willing person in your life.



What is one change you could make to the way you absorb the information from your topics, based on the suggestions above?

A large empty rectangular box for writing an answer to the question above.



## Making sure you can get all that material **out of** your head

Ok – so you got all that information into your head. When exams come, you are going to need to get it out again. You'll also have to get it out again when you start working in your profession. It is called retrieval.

The best way to improve retrieval is to practice it regularly. The more often you practice retrieving information from that brain of yours, the better you'll get at it. In fact, even if you don't feel you've learned the material well yet, it is good to start practising retrieving it. Here's how....



**Recall the previous day** – when studying over consecutive days, start your day by trying to remember as much as you can about what you studied the previous day.

**Time to use those flash cards** – Remember those flash cards you created earlier? Now is the time to start regularly self-testing yourself using those cards. Read the questions on the one side and try to recall the information on the other. Test yourself regularly with these cards over the course of the semester. Don't worry about getting some wrong. Making errors is a crucial part of the retrieval practice process. Over time, you can reduce your stack of flash cards by putting aside those ones you can answer easily and repeatedly.

**Explain things to yourself** – Wait till the house is empty and you have some privacy and try explaining important concepts out loud to yourself. Imagine yourself teaching a class of peers and having to explain the concepts. If you are involved in a study group, this can actually be done for real. And yes, if you are thinking that this strategy appeared in the previous section, then you are correct. It works as both a learning and retrieval practice exercise.

**Practise testing** – Get hold of old exams or tests and practise taking them. It is preferable if the tests are pure recall tests, but multiple choice can still be useful.

**Study location** – If you are going to be tested in a familiar and accessible location, try to do some study sessions in that location. If the test location is not accessible, practise retrieving information across a range of settings. This weakens the association of the information to a single location.

**Visualise yourself where you learned it** – when you sit down in the exam room and you are trying to bring to mind all that juicy content, imagine yourself being in the place where you learned it all. That might mean visualising your study space at home or that favourite nook at the library.

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**Regular spaced retrieval practice** – Spaced practice means doing something regularly over an extended period of time, compared to doing just a few long practice sessions. Spaced practice is better than massed practice. For example, it is better to test yourself for ½ hour, every week, during semester (total 4-5 hours) than it is to test yourself for 2 ½ hours each day in the two days before an exam (also 4-5 hours). The reason that students don't normally do this? It takes good organisational abilities to start your learning and self-testing early in the semester. If your topic coordinator provides regular 'quizzes', then make sure you do them. They are essentially providing you with a space practice opportunity.

Have a practice at retrieval right now. Write down as much as you can remember about the last thing you learned, lecture you attended.

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## Learning skills

A lot of what we need to learn at University are skills. Depending on what you are studying, the skills will vary - writing essays, solving mathematical problems, using lab equipment, counselling someone.

In the early stages when we don't have a skill, we learn best by watching others demonstrate the skill. For example, in mathematics we like to see worked examples. In essay writing we like to read examples of good essays written on a similar topic. In the lab, we like to see someone using the equipment we are about to use ourselves.

In the process of observing others display the skill, we are breaking the skill up into steps or stages and then having a go at the different parts of it ourselves. So, you might read a good essay introduction and then have a go at writing an introduction for yourself, in your own words. In essence you are mimicking those who can already do the skill and referring back to worked examples to see if you are on the right track.

As we develop our skill level, we can start removing those supports. We can take away the worked examples, take away the example essays, take away the lab instructions, and do the skill from scratch with less and less guidance. As this happens, the skill becomes more about something we can do spontaneously versus something we are mimicking.

**Note:** whilst I encourage students who are learning how to write essays to read lots of examples of good essays and mimic some of the basic concepts, this is **NOT** permission to copy the work of other people and present as your own. You still need to be writing stuff in your own words and reflecting your own opinions and research. Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and not tolerated.



## Things not to do

Naturally therefore, these are the things that everyone does.

**Cram (known as massed practice)** – Let's be honest, we all do this. We leave all the readings and learning to the last minute and try to do it in one caffeine fuelled blob. Look – sometimes it can be effective if you just need to retain the information for a very short period of time, but overall it is a poor method for retaining material over a longer period, and remember, beyond exams, you will need some of this material for your actual job. You can't really afford to lose it from your brain, the second the exam is finished.



**Multi-task** – There is no such thing as multi-tasking [actually, this isn't quite right. It is more the case that there isn't a good way to multi-task whilst doing a focused task]. If you believe you can multi-task, then really the only talent you have is being able to switch quickly between tasks. Rapid switching between tasks consumes mental energy and impairs performance on all tasks. Just study one thing at a time. If giving up multi-tasking is difficult consider some of the ideas in <https://psyche.co/ideas/go-on-admit-it-youre-multitasking-heres-how-to-do-it-better>

**Repeated reading** – after reading something a couple of times, any further reading adds little to your learning. You have to introduce active strategies (summarising, flash cards, self-testing) after a couple of reads for complete learning to occur.

**Assume that mistakes and errors are bad** – Making mistakes and errors in exams or assignments isn't ideal. But making mistakes and errors whilst we are learning is actually a good sign. Errors and mistakes help you identify the limits of your knowledge, help highlight/spotlight the correct answers, and show you that you are pushing yourself hard. The more errors and mistakes we make whilst learning, the more likely it is that we'll end up with a strong understanding of the necessary material.

Based on what you've read so far, what existing study habits do you have that could be replaced with better habits?

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## Embrace the social

Studying by yourself all the time can be lonely and boring (although admittedly I prefer studying alone). Some people benefit from the energy of occasionally studying with friends, which can make it more enjoyable, but also offers up learning hacks that are difficult to do on your own.



### **Find the smart people and start a study group**

– Generally you can identify the smart students. They ask interesting questions during lectures or tutorials, they seem to know the material and they appear a bit neurotic (sorry, smart people 😊). Start a study group with these people. Not only will they push you to be better, you will learn specific techniques and ideas for how they learn.

**Practise justifying and teaching concepts to a fellow student** – The level of understanding required to successfully teach a concept to a fellow student suggests the material is well learned. In a study group, each select a topic or concept ahead of time, and then when you meet, try to teach each other those concepts.

**Get someone else to test you on your flash cards** – When they are taken out of your hands, it is much harder to cheat.

**Try a virtual study buddy** – I've not used these services before, but I have heard some good reports from students and I do have friends on messaging and we coordinate our working times together, occasionally sharing what we are doing and reinforcing each other's focus and concentration - <https://www.focusmate.com/>. Make sure it doesn't degenerate into just an online chat in which case you are just both procrastinating.

I hear quite a few post-graduate students describe using this method. They have a writing buddy or a writing group. They meet online or in-person, each selects a writing task and then they write in each other's presence, with a catch-up at the end to share their progress.

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## Find the fun

I commonly hear students describing how their studies are no longer fun and interesting. Part of this is normal and simply the reality of doing a university degree.

However, if you find the fun has really disappeared from your studies, try exploring ways to add some fun/interest to what you are learning.

**Embrace the social** – see the points previously. Adding people to the mix can make learning more engaging. Also, study groups often become social groups.

**Join a club** – There is a club for everything. Clubs (<https://fusa.edu.au/clubs/>) offer opportunities for socialising and extra-curricular projects within your area of study which can invigorate your interest in the topic.

**Start a project** – There is nothing stopping you doing something extra with the content you are learning. For example, you might start a blog describing your learning process (at the same time practising your writing) or make a film about some aspect of your study. Create a project that is connected to your studies but gives you the opportunity to engage with the content in a different way.

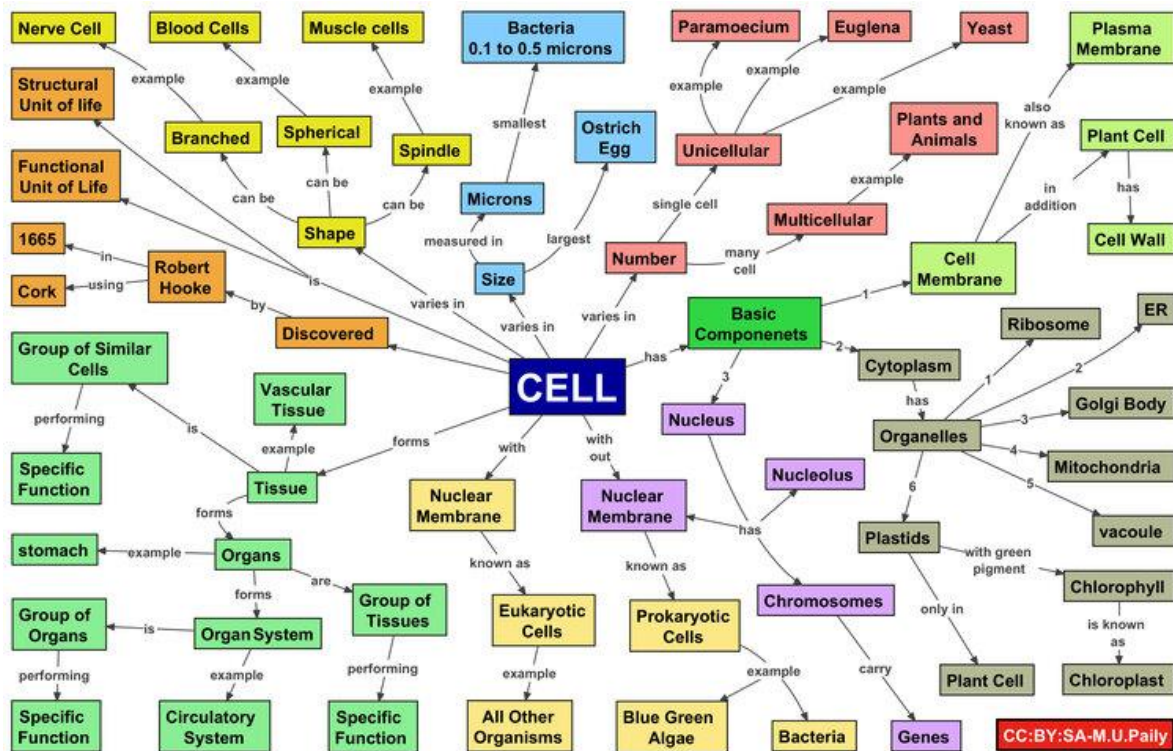




## Find the artistic

**Concept mapping** – concept maps are visual representations of information, showing the links between different concepts. They are useful for students who like visual learning. Preparing concept maps can be a useful overarching exercise for learning material in a particular topic.

Learn more at <https://www.uow.edu.au/student/learning-co-op/effective-studying/concept-mapping>



M.U.Paily, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

Based on what you've read, what is the most likely thing you think you could change about how you study?

## Common study/writing traps and how to deal with them

One of our psychologists wrote an excellent short article on how to deal with specific study/writing traps, the kind that she most commonly sees students fall into. I've reproduced it below.

- 1) If **overwhelmed** -> do a **brain dump**
  - a. A brain dump is simply the act of attempting to get everything on your mind down onto paper (or a document on your computer). From a study perspective, it is about getting everything that you need to get done down on paper.
  - b. Brain dumps help to download information from your mind so that you don't have to juggle it all in your mind continuously. A brain dump stops you swirling around in your head trying to find (remember) and organise the information.
  - c. Frees up space in brain, so it's got more room to think. Helps to identify mini-tasks. If having trouble identifying mini-tasks, see "[Assignment Survival Kit](#)" on University of Kent website for examples
  - d. Note: don't just leave your ideas in this form, ALWAYS pair it with a next action plan (i.e. a weekly schedule/planner)
  
- 2) If trying to figure out how to **manage your time** better -> **schedule & plan ahead**
  - a. Using a week-to-a-view planner is the best format. They look like this:

**Weekly Planner**

Time	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00							
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							

- b. Fill in all of your classes, tutorials, practicals, labs, workshops etc.
- c. Fill in the hours you work.
- d. Fill in the time it takes you to get ready and travel between home, uni and work.
- e. Fill in any other regular appointments or responsibilities (medical appointments, sport, transporting children etc).
- f. Fill in a breakfast, lunch, snack and dinner break. Include time for food preparation.
- g. Establish a set time to go to sleep and get up in the morning.
- h. Assign time for studying for each class/topic. Try to study for classes on they days they meet. Use large blocks for major tasks, smaller blocks for reviews/revision.

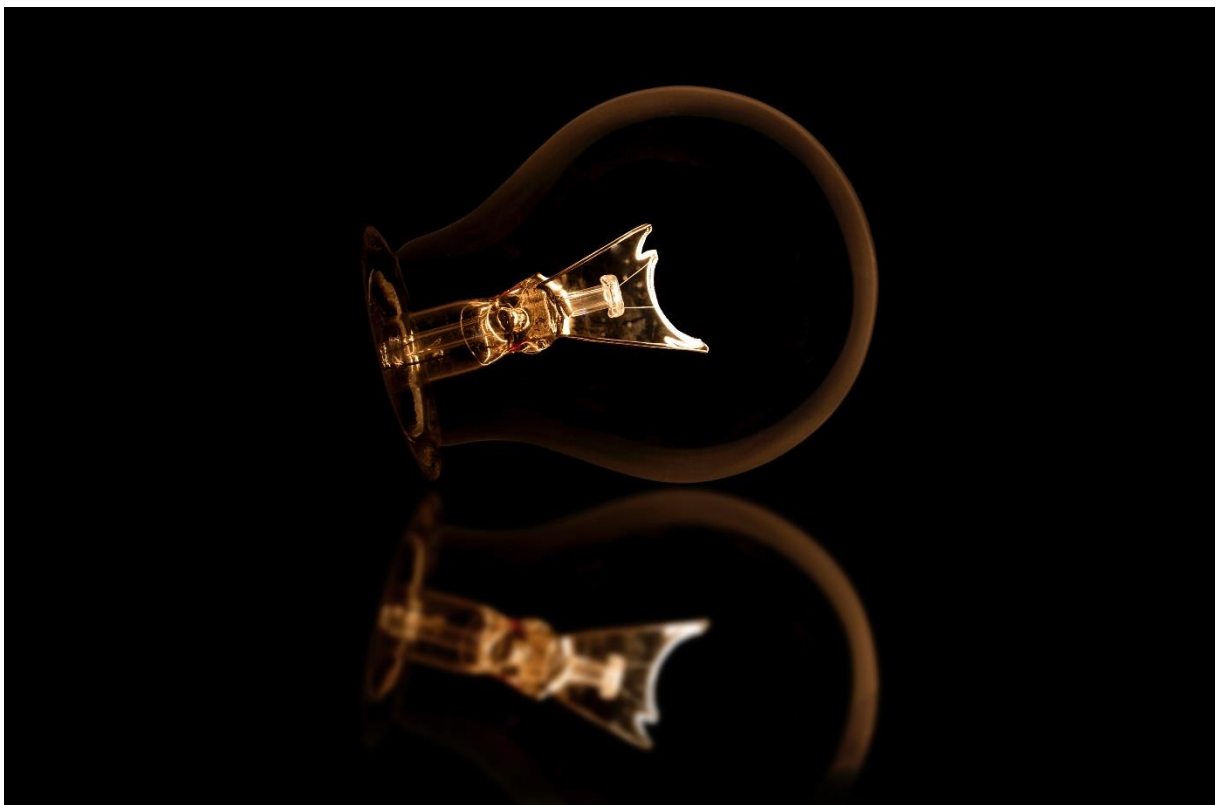
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- i. Schedule regular breaks and rewards for completing a task – don't marathon study.
  - j. Schedule fun events – recreation, watching television, going out with friends.
  - k. This process helps you find 'hidden time' you didn't know you had.
  - l. Helps to identify where you don't have time (due to other commitments), but visually show you where you do have time. If there isn't enough time available to study for all of your classes, then you might need to re-evaluate your priorities. You might need to cut or delay other commitments.
  - m. This is a good process for 'reality testing'. We often go around saying 'I don't have enough time' and freaking out. This process helps us test the truth of that statement. Can be relieving when we realise we do have the time.
  - n. Scheduling helps your brain to not feel so helpless by committing to doing something about it. If you don't schedule it, it won't happen
  - o. If your schedule looks reasonable, then stick to it!
- 3) If not knowing **where to start?** -> do the **harder tasks** first thing in the day
- a. Helps to get started on something before you get distracted by the day.
  - b. The 'eat that frog' principle – if you do the hardest mini-task first in the day, the rest of the day (when you are most active) will have less anxiety. You can Google 'eat that frog' to read other people's views and use of this time management technique.
- 4) If **struggling to get started** -> use the **30-minute rule**
- a. Commit to doing 30 minutes of 'writing' (not reading). Writing helps you to lay down ideas. Just reading can be used to procrastinate further.
  - b. Set a timer and start writing.
  - c. At the end of the 30-minutes, either keep going (if you have momentum) or take a short break and repeat.
  - d. Brains are more likely to agree to doing a short session of work, rather than starting the day with the expectation of doing 6+ hours of work.
  - e. A little bit of action can trigger motivation.
- 5) If **struggling to write** something -> first **write whatever you think you know**
- a. Explain your existing ideas in simplified terms, as if you were explaining it to a layman/child.
  - b. Use a 'write -> reading -> write' sequence instead of starting with reading. This sequence helps you to find where the gaps in your knowledge are first, and then you can fill in the gaps with a summary of what you read.
  - c. This sequence also helps to optimise time, as it lets your work organically grow each time you sit down at your workstation.
  - d. The strongest writers revise and edit their work in multiple rounds, rather than hoping they'll write something perfect the first time round, so view each piece of writing as coming together with multiple run-throughs.
- 6) If **struggling to maintain the work flow** -> **sign-post** your work
- a. Sign-posting your work involves identifying what *you* feel you would like to write next, whilst you are still in the work flow (i.e. write this down *before* you leave your work station). For example, at the end of a 30-minute writing session, before taking a break, you identify what you want to focus on next.
  - b. Sign-posting helps you to *connect* each study session. This helps to save time at the next study session thinking about where to start off again. You can kick off straight away by following your own instructions.
  - c. Example – "the very next most important thing to write is....."

7) If **feeling isolated** -> use the '**phone a friend**' approach

- a. Use study buddies and study groups (see 'embrace the social', page 6). Involving others encourages you to set up regular vs. haphazard study routines. Being part of a group that is attempting to be studious increases the likelihood that you will be studious (i.e. you are surrounding yourself with studious people). Having people to answer to helps to also make you more self-accountable.
- b. Make use of tutors, Learning Lounge (<https://students.flinders.edu.au/study-support/slc/learning-lounge>) & Studiosity (<https://students.flinders.edu.au/study-support/slc/studiosity>). Getting feedback along the way helps to manage the overwhelm/anxiety and the 'I have no idea what's going on' feeling.
- c. Make an appointment with the Counselling Service:  
<https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd/counselling>

8) If **feeling unwell** -> look after your **wellbeing and health**

- a. Be deliberate about your self-care. Don't work for longer than 2 hours at any one time. Have a break before continuing. Acknowledge and address the downside to 'binge' studying for hours on end (e.g., headaches, eye strain, back/neck aches). Being productive is not possible if you're unwell, stressed, anxious or depressed. You'll probably only end up doing only a couple hours of quality work anyway. Check out our self-care guide - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/06/20/self-care-mega-guide/>
- b. Book an appointment with a GP! Seeing a medical professional can help encourage you to better monitor your health and wellbeing. It can also motivate you to put things in place to prevent future health or wellbeing issues (e.g. eating better, getting more physical activity). Can also be a form of additional support should you need assistance in request for extra time for your assignments due to illness - <https://students.flinders.edu.au/student-services/hcd>.



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## Find balance between studies and the rest of your life

If spending some extra time on your studies (using evidence-based study strategies) is likely to improve performance, then surely spending **ALL** of your time on your studies must be the secret to perfect performance?!

I'm afraid not. But maybe not for the reasons you might think.

I'm not theoretically opposed to someone just focusing in on a single thing in their life and working incredibly hard on it. Some people can manage this quite well for short to medium periods of time.

The problem with this approach, as far as I can gather, is that it sets up a precarious situation in terms of motivation.

You see if we derive all of our self-worth from a single activity, and then we experience significant setbacks or failures in relation to that activity, then it has the potential to undermine our self-worth and hence our motivation to keep going. If my work is my life, and then I lose my job, what else do I have to motivate me to keep going?

I've expanded a bit on this in this blog post - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/2019/12/09/how-much-of-your-self-worth-comes-from-your-studies/>

Finding the right balance between your studies and the rest of your life involves some trial and error. Specifically, you need to schedule into your life different activities and see which ones yield the best outcomes. What you are looking for is that these activities leave you feeling refreshed and rejuvenated and keen to get back to your studies. When I spend the weekend gardening, I am keen to get back to work on Monday.



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## When things don't go well

Students commonly present to Health, Counselling and Disability Services ([www.flinders.edu.au/hcd](http://www.flinders.edu.au/hcd)) feeling ashamed that they've succumbed to procrastination (putting assignments off), perfectionism (unrelenting excessive self-standards) or imposter syndrome (feeling like one is a fraud). What they don't often realise is how common these problems are, and that any of us (students or staff) can fall prey to them.

If you feel like your study has gone off the rails, first extend yourself some forgiveness and self-compassion. Acknowledge that there is a problem but remind yourself that such issues are common and that **you will be able** to get back on track. Slip-ups, errors and failures are a normal part of life, and not a sign that you are broken. In fact, in the middle of the emotional upheaval associated with a failure, we forget that experiences of failing typically end up being powerful experiences that change us for the better in the medium to long-term.

Start by looking back through this tip sheet and select a few study strategies to implement. View your studies as a bit of an experiment, where you are trying different strategies and seeing which ones work best for you. If you are having ongoing troubles, consider coming along to have a chat with a counsellor. Also stay tuned to the Student Health and Wellbeing Blog (<https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/student-health-and-well-being/>) for more articles and programs designed to help with common issues.



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## Final thoughts

I recently read a study that indicated that students who take the time to engage with the topic of how to learn (e.g. read a handout like this and experiment with making some changes to how they study), end up being better learners and performing better.



If this stuff interests you and you want to know more about how you can improve your learning ability, I can recommend the following:

- Lauren from SLSS used to maintain an excellent study skills blog for Yunggoendi that has lots of in-depth tips on essay writing and study strategies - <https://blogs.flinders.edu.au/yunggoendi-study-skills/>
- The Learning Scientists website (<http://www.learningscientists.org/>) developed by a team of cognitive psychological scientists interested in the science of learning.
- College Info Geek produces a large amount of content on being a better student - <https://collegeinfo geek.com/>
- The Science of Learning Research Centre conducts and reports research on how to improve the learning process - <https://www.slr c.org.au/>
- Retrieval Practice is a website dedicated to understand how retrieval practice improves learning - <https://www.retrievalpractice.org/>
- This guy writes very popular books on productivity - <http://www.calnewport.com/books/straight-a-student/>
- For those writing a thesis, you should definitely add <https://thesiswhisperer.com/> and <https://researchinsiders.blog/> to your subscriptions.
- Scott Young is a great writer on the topic of learning. Here is an article of his that is a great introduction - <https://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2022/09/19/learning-mental-models>
- This very popular course is intensive but focused very much on learning to master difficult topics - <https://www.coursera.org/learn/learning-how-to-learn>

Finally, if you've found or developed your own effective study hacks/ habits along the way, feel free to share them with me ([gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au](mailto:gareth.furber@flinders.edu.au)) and I will try to build them into future versions of this guide. Students are one of my best sources for interesting and cool study hacks, so let's share them.



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Did you find this handout useful? Could it be improved? Let us know how to make this handout better for students by completing the short survey accessed using the QR code below

