

Study **SMART**

BUILD THE SKILLS FOR YOUR SUCCESS



Study Help and Exam Skills

PDF resources included in this section

CONTENTS – STUDY HELP AND EXAM SKILLS

1. Approaches to Learning

2. Setting Goals

3. Starting and Managing a Study Group

4. Creating Your Study Space

5. Studying for Exams

6. General Note-Taking Advice

7. Learning From Feedback

Study Help and Exam Skills

Read this guide for strategies to help you study and prepare for exams.

Study Help and Exam Skills

As a student, you will likely recognise the feeling of information-overload that comes with assignments and exams. Why not take advantage of the uni's events and resources on exam and assessment preparation? Get the help you need to feel organised, start that assignment, and create those exam notes. Mastering assessment and exam preparation techniques will improve your university experience, and you will learn how to demolish those late nights and get closer to those HDs.

STUDY SMART WEBSITE

Find this section on the Study Smart website here:

http://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart/home/study_help_and_exam_skills

Approaches to learning

There are MANY forms of taking notes. Yes that's right, not just simply writing words on a page or typing them on a screen. We have to acknowledge that there is an ongoing battle between 'old school' pen and paper and newer electronic devices in the note-taking realm.

Interestingly, a study by Washington University (Hotz, 2016) found that those who typed notes had better recall of lecture content immediately after the lecture, while those who wrote their notes by hand had better recall over time. What does this mean? Well, basically it means you need to find what works for you and the situation you are in.

Below you'll find a brief overview of some of the current popular techniques as well as links out to helpful information on learning how to use them.

Best approaches to learning

One of the features we need to look at is how we adapt memory and learning to note-taking. Let's look at a study from Kent State University (Paul, 2013) which looked at the best, worst, and mediocre study techniques. Their findings are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Note-Taking Strategies

Good	Mediocre	Worst
Spreading out study sessions (distributed practice) Practice testing	Mental imagery Asking 'why' whilst reading (elaborative interrogation) Mixing problems (interleaved practice) Mnemonics (word association)	Highlighting and underlining Rereading Summarising key points

Adapted from Paul (2013). Copyright 2013 by *Time*.

So what does this tell us? Firstly, note-taking isn't necessarily the top technique for learning, but can form an integral part of that technique. The best learning strategies are not specifically about note-taking but rely on you having taken good notes. It also shows that we need to rethink some more traditional approaches to taking notes. It might be time to retire that highlighter!?

It's still important to 'note' that you have to find the format that actually works for you, and that this might not be what is easiest to do at the time. It needs to be the option that best facilitates your capacity to learn. [Note-taking techniques](#) (PDF, 513 kB) can help you to identify a specific technique that could work for you.

References

- Hotz, R. L. (2016, April 4). Can handwriting make you smarter? *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/can-handwriting-make-you-smarter-1459784659>
- Paul, A. M. (2013, January 9). Highlighting is a waste of time: the best and worst learning techniques. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://ideas.time.com/2013/01/09/highlighting-is-a-waste-of-time-the-best-and-worst-learning-techniques/>



Setting goals

How to

Goals only come into fruition when you work on them! The first step is to think of all the goals you have for all domains of life, and then identify a handful that you want to work on. You can identify things that you want to achieve in the short-term (the next few hours or days), and the long-term (the next three months, by the end of this year).

Define

Identifying goals is not as simple as saying 'I want to raise my grade point average', 'I want to read more' or 'I want to get a job after I finish my studies'. To really define a goal, you need to make it SMART:

S Specific	Think about the 5 Ws (who, what, where, when and why)
M Measurable	How will you know you've achieved the goal?
A Attainable	Is the goal feasible?
R Realistic	Is the goal stretching you, but not so much that you cannot reach it?
T Time-bound	What is the exact deadline?

Example

Simple Goal	SMART Goal
I want to read more	By this time next year I will have read one book every month, for a total of twelve books a year.
I want a new job	By December this year I will have completed my Senior First Aid course and have applied for at least five jobs to work in after-school care.
I want to finish my report assignment	By April 21st I will have completed a 3,000 word report assignment, using APA referencing, based on five commercial reports and five government reports.
I want to do better in my tutorials	By next week's tutorial I will have completed my readings, written notes including questions, and had a brief study group with two classmates to discuss and brainstorm the topic before attending the tutorial.

Break it down

After you clearly articulate your goal, make it SMART, and write it down, it's time to chunk it into manageable tasks. Let's take the report assignment example from above:

SMART Goal

By April 21st I will have completed a 3,000-word report assignment, using APA referencing, based on five commercial reports and five government reports.

Steps to achieve it

- Research
(Start around 2-3 months before due date)
- Drafting
(Start around 21 days before due date)
- Editing/Proofreading
(Start around ten days before due date)
- Submission
(Due Date)

Make an action plan

An action plan is a list of all the tasks required to complete the goal. Remember, a list is nothing until you start making your way through it! And as you do, your ideas may change and so, too, your action plan. This is a part of study and work life. What you need to do is learn how to adapt as you go. It's a good idea to refer to your action plan when scheduling study time daily and weekly. This will keep you on track to complete on time.

Here's what an action plan could look like for the assignment example used above:

1. Search commercial business websites for annual reports; locate five recent reports from five companies
2. Search Library databases for five government reports on the topic
3. Read, analyse, and take notes on commercial reports
4. Read, analyse, and take notes on five government reports
5. Brainstorm and mindmap appraisal/assessment key points
6. Prepare report outline with headings
7. Add dot points for content to address each section of the report
8. Allocate time to do draft writing (500 words over six days)
9. Review first draft
10. Complete second draft with APA referencing ten days before deadline then submit to Studiosity for feedback and Turnitin for an originality check (both available via **vUWS**, although some units may not enable the use of Turnitin for draft submissions)
11. Read through and address Studiosity feedback recommendations
12. Complete final proofread of third draft
13. Submit through Turnitin before deadline

You can also use the **Study Smart Assignment Calculator** tool to help you prepare an action plan for completing individual assignments. Just enter your assignment due date and the **Assignment Calculator** will break down your assignment into steps and tell you how much time you should allocate to each step. It will also link you to the Study Smart resources that will help you accomplish each step. You can then use the 'Print' function in your browser to print or save a PDF of your customized assignment plan to keep you on track.



Starting and managing a study group

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) at Western

PASS is like a super study group, facilitated by a senior student who has completed the unit. In the weekly sessions, you will quickly build your learning strategies, develop your content knowledge, and improve your problem solving skills. The sessions are also a great opportunity to build a network of like-minded friends and collaborators.

Research assessing the effectiveness and impact of PASS has shown that students who regularly attended PASS:

- Scored significantly higher grades
- Improved their understanding of subject content
- Felt better prepared for exams or final essays
- Enjoyed the learning experience
- Learned how to better work collaboratively and productively

At Western Sydney University, you can attend **PASS on-campus** or online (**PASSOnline**).

DIY (Do-It-Yourself) study group

If PASS is not offered for your unit(s), or if you are unable to attend on campus or online, you can create your own study group. Humans are social beings, and learning and teaching is a social experience. Learning with, and from, each other in small groups gives you the opportunity to creatively and collaboratively determine the meaning, importance and applicability of knowledge and concepts in your discipline without the authority of a designated expert or teacher.

There are a number of factors, however, that you must consider to maintain group cohesion and to prevent a productive, focused, and truly collaborative environment from turning into chaos. Below are some guiding points.

Agenda

Organisation is the key. After co-ordinating schedules to select a regular day and time, you need a space, e.g. an indoor or outdoor study space on campus, at a host's house, or a public space. The details of the session schedule should ideally be drafted together, in advance, with any preparation work clearly identified and explicitly allocated. Some study groups decide to set a rotating study session leader role. In this 'round robin' situation, the designated leader is in charge of setting the agenda and preparation tasks, and notifying all members the week before. Then, on study group day, the leader initiates each item on the agenda to keep the session on time.

An agenda doesn't have to be a precise plan, just a directional sign structured around specific targets or topics, and where possible some goals or outcomes or measures that help you work out when you've adequately addressed an issue. Clarifying your collective aims in advance will help you to stay on task.

Example

Time	Issue/Topic/Target	Goal/Outcome/Measure
11am	This week's lecture	One-sentence summary/group mind-map
	Notes exchange/discussion	Top 3 questions
	Big questions/concepts	
11:15am-	This week's upcoming tutorial	Definition of jargon/difficult terminology
11:45am	Readings discussion	Theory explained in simple terms
	Interpreting the theory	Example exam question
	How it expands on the lecture content	
	How it might appear as an exam question	
11:45am-	Assignment 1	Assignment topics announced
12:15pm	Choose essay topic	
	Discuss research approach*	Share a concept map of similar steps in research approach
	Share reference management strategies and tools	Exchange links/instructions on ref management tools
12:15pm	Summary / Minute paper	3 things learned, 3 questions remaining, 3 actions to take
	Prep/Brainstorm for next study session	Session leader nominated, set agenda outline, agreed next session date/time

In the beginning, it might be difficult to get all group members to think of what they want to address. These prompts might help you to assist them figure out their needs:

The main question I want to answer is...
 A question I have is...
 X says Y. B interprets it as C. Is that really what X meant?
 I got confused when...
 I'm not sure of...
 I agree / disagree with X because...
 I think that X voices are being left out because...

Group dynamics

There are a few things you can establish from the outset to ensure that your study group lasts and works well by promoting connection, open communication, and equality.

The most fun and, frankly, the easiest task to include is a two- to five-minute ice breaker or energiser game at the beginning of each study session. It helps to set the foundation for working together, enjoying the company of others, and the all-important bonding and connecting with each other beyond the subject matter. This can (and should!) be done every week. Again, you can allocate this

task to the session leader or have an Energizer Game Leader designated and responsible for this task. There are loads of ideas out there – Google is only a click away. Just be mindful of the space you are in, the time you have, and the familiarity of the group with each other. Here are a few low-budget, easy-to-run group favourites:

Energiser	Description
The Name Game	Each participant states their name and either the etymology (meaning) of their name and/or the story of how they came to be named.
Treasure Island	Each participant identifies the three items they would take with them on a deserted island and why.
Human Knot	In a circle, participants put their arms in the centre and find someone else's hand to hold. Once all hands have been joined, as a group, participants work together to unravel the knot without letting go of hands.
Fear in a Hat	Each participant anonymously writes down a personal fear on a piece of paper. The paper is folded up and put into a hat or container. Each participant then draws out a piece of paper, reads out the fear written on it, and explains how the person might feel.
Incommunicado	Each participant remains silent (no vocal sounds). A facilitator calls out random features (e.g. height) or abilities (e.g. number of push-ups you can do), etc. The participants, without speaking to each other, must arrange themselves in a line in order (e.g. from tallest to shortest; from the least to the most number of push-ups).
Whose Line Is It Anyway?	Participants take turns being the 'actor'. The designated actor performs a line from a television show or movie, and all other participants have to guess the name of the television show or movie.

Once commonalities are shared and rapport starts to build, you can begin to address preferred modes of communication amongst the group. Will all correspondence be via Western student email? Will you use Office 365 to collaboratively compose, edit, and share the agenda and other resources? Will you use Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp to notify the group if you're feeling sick a few days before or running late on the day?

It's also a good way to segue into roles and responsibilities and reach an understanding on what equality looks like in your study group. What is the back-up plan if the session leader is away? Does everyone agree to organise a session and run it in a 'round robin'? Or does everyone prefer to make a small contribution each week? What strategies do you all prefer to use so that everyone contributes vocally each week, that no one dominates, and that no one feels like they can't voice their ideas? It's important to remember that you don't have to have everything figured out from the start, but as long as you set the tone for equal contribution it'll make it easier to work towards equitable learning out loud through dialogue and debate.

Doing the learning

When you think of a study group, what do you think of? A small group of students seated at a round table in a private study room? That's really just one option. Don't let the idea of traditional study groups limit your creativity. You'll find a few ideas in [Maximise your productivity](#) (PDF, 270 kB), like a walking and talking study group session with the aid of, for example, flash cards.

Learning exchange can extend beyond discussion. You can make your study activities more dynamic and fun by allowing group members to create activities, games, treasure hunts, scenarios, etc. to explore your discipline content in a different, and often more active, way. It's ok to play when learning. Play occurs in safe spaces where you experiment, make mistakes, learn, retry, and challenge yourself and others. By thinking and acting outside of your comfort zone you follow curiosity to surprising discoveries. What can you do to use play in activities to immerse yourself and learn?

Examples

Activity	Description
Peripatetic	Walking, talking, discussing a single topic, for example a student study group at University of Alaska Southeast (video, 1:00).
PeerWise	An online study group option. Start a group, individuals create Q&As on topics for peers to practice and discuss.
Think Visually	Think differently! Instead of creating a timeline to study the progression of a historical battle or development, why not use a blank geographical map of the areas involved and use a free drawing approach to connect the information and issues – and most importantly, what you don't know! Example via The Junto for American historians. Instead of writing an outline of a topic or your essay argument, why not give everyone a piece of A4 paper, a marker pen, and two minutes to sketch their ideas. Then give everyone two minutes to explain their creation. These visual thinking basics 'how to' videos will help.
Gamify	Instead of cramming notes into your head for the exam, can you create trivia-style questions?

Inspiration

If you ever doubt the capacity of students to make incredible contributions to their own learning and those of their peers, then take a look at the students who participated in the '[computer in the wall' experiments](#) (video, 17:25) all over the world. As a team, without traditional educational resources and support, these children were able to learn by observing each other, discussing ideas and approaches, and collaboratively problem solving.



Creating your study space

At home and on campus

It's important to know that there is no perfect study environment: there is only the study space that works for you. Below is a short list of some things to consider when setting up or reviewing your study space.



Furniture

For the majority of your study time you'll likely need a desk and a chair. Depending on your task, you might need a lot of table space to spread out all manner of books, readings, Post-It notes, and mind maps in addition to your computer or device. Huge **group study room** tables in the Library are useful for this, as is the kitchen table at home. Individual desks at home and private study pods in the Library are most often utilised for unit and research reading and short individual assignments and tutorial tasks.

Keep in mind that the occasional change of scenery can help manage the ebbs and flows of productivity. Is there a comfy armchair or rug nearby to do a portion of your readings? Is there a quiet time at the campus cafe or your local cafe to enjoy an afternoon caffeine boost and some brainstorming or mind mapping? Is there a picnic blanket and cushion nearby that you could take to the backyard, local park, or campus grounds for a sunshine-infused free-writing session?

Light and temperature

Speaking of natural light, are your study spaces on and off campus well-lit during the day? Do you have a good study lamp for any late night sessions? Ideally, you should have three or more sources of light from above, beside, or behind you. These multiple sources should work together to reduce the shadow you see over your work area.

Have you ever had a single light in the centre of the room cast a shadow of your head on to your book or laptop? When you position your desk and chair next to or at an angle to a window it makes your study space appear a little bigger. Remember, too, that since lighting is connected to our vision, and over 80 per cent of our perception of the world is through our eyes, it's important to monitor lighting for our visual health in the long run.

Study space temperature is a hot topic – pun intended! Safe Work Australia advises that sedentary (i.e. inactive, seated) work zones should be 20 to 26 degrees Celsius, depending on the season and the worker's clothing. In contrast, **researchers exploring temperature and productivity** have identified

21 to 22 degrees Celsius at the temperature-productivity hotspot. Anything above 23 to 24 degrees Celsius shows a marked drop in productivity of workers.

Fortunately, on-campus facilities have temperature control. While at home you may need to invest in a fan or heater (or snuggie). Don't forget that four-legged study buddies (pets) double as excellent hot water bottles in winter!

Sound and smell

Music can make repetitive tasks easier to complete, which is why [music boosts a runner's performance](#). It can also help you escape a noisy workplace or your inner thoughts, which is why it's used for guided meditations. Some music (irregular beats and progressions with lyrics) can, however, interfere with and distract from learning.

When it comes to studying, your best bet is ambient noise at a moderate level. Apps like [Noisli](#) provide this free and online. You can also try study playlists and nature noises for free online, and through other streaming services like [Spotify](#). Alternatively, you can make your own playlist at home. Research informs us that baroque music ([a study by The American Roentgen Ray Society](#)) and repetitive ambient electronica ([a study by Mehta, Rhu & Cheema, 2012](#)) are best for concentration, while your favourite music can be best when you need to focus on work.

Scents can unconsciously enhance or impede your productivity. Just as incense and oil burning is used to signal sacred spaces, some people like to use these to create a focused and relaxing atmosphere in their study space. Similarly, the odours from people, perfumes, the great outdoors, and food can disrupt your train of thought. Controlling these environmental factors can be difficult in group study spaces. If it's distracting you, then relocate to a better suited area.

Equipment

Personal study spaces and group study spaces in the Library are multifunctional with display screens or writing boards (chalkboard, whiteboard or pinboard). Aside from your device of choice, it's best to have a bookshelf and/or cabinet space to store all study related items and maintain a clean working space.

It's equally important to ensure basic amenities and resources are accessible or very close at hand. Get to know the location of toilets and water fountains at your campus Library. Invest in a water bottle to stay hydrated, and put snacks on your desk and in your bag to keep your energy up.

Online

Accessing your units and all manner of learning materials and resources online can quickly become a messy and confusing affair if you don't develop your own system of bookmarks and quick links. The most time efficient workers set up their devices to cater towards the work they're doing.

Activity

What are the most common online resources you use for your study at Western Sydney University?

Example

Bookmark Toolbar = Important / Everyday	Bookmark Menu = Irregularly used	Menu Folders E.g. Assignment Essentials
Student Email	Subject Outlines (via Library > Resources)	eResources (aka Databases) (via Library > Resources)
vUWS	Study Smart Librarians (via Library > Services)	Subject Guides (via Library Guides)
Reserve (for readings) (via Library > Guides)	PASS timetable PASSwrite timetable	Referencing and Citation (via Library > Guides)
Library (for catalogue searching)	MESH (Mathematics Education Support Hub)	Turnitin and GradeMark (via Library > Guides)
	Exam Papers (via Library > Resources)	

Projects

When you're enrolled in a full-time study load, it's easy to lose sight of what you're working on and where files and resources are located. In addition to bookmarking the essentials, you'll need to decide on a system that will help you locate and access digital items after you've used them. Many people use software and apps that provide for data tagging – from MS Outlook to Gmail, to Evernote. Your unit codes and topic descriptions are a great first level tag to attribute to your notes and files.

References

Mehta, R., Zhu, R., & Cheema, A. (2012). Is noise always bad? Exploring the effects of ambient noise on creative cognition.

Journal of Consumer Research, 39(4), 784-799. doi:10.1086/665048.



Exams

Exam info

Get the details for your exams as soon as possible. Your main sources of information at first will be your [Learning Guides](#) and [Past Exam Papers](#) (where available). You'll also find essential information at the official [Exams & Results website](#). Click the headings below to link to the resource.

LEARNING GUIDE	PAST EXAM PAPERS	WSU EXAMS & RESULTS WEBSITE	MY EXAM TIMETABLE
•How much the exam is worth for that unit •How long the exam will be •How the exam helps you achieve learning outcomes	•Exam questions from previous years •How long the exam was •Opportunity to practise under exam conditions	•Exam rules •What to bring/travel & planning tips •Exam timetable info •FAQs	•Your personalised exam timetable •Available later in semester •Dates & times •Locations

Studying for exams

Write a 30-second **summary** after each class or reading.
Study in **regular** short, focussed sessions to keep up with unit content.
Form a **study group** & learn from each other.
Explain key concepts to others.

All semester

Organise your notes.
Create mind maps, flash cards & other tools.
Select key content to revise based on exam info.
Practise with past papers.

1-2 weeks before

Read over notes on key content.
Get a good night's **sleep!**

Night before

Tip: Bookmark the [Common task words](#) guide (PDF, 107 kB) as a study resource. You'll be able to respond better to your exam questions if you're familiar with these common instruction words.

Study Techniques

There are many ways to engage with what you learn, to transform your knowledge, make it meaningful to you, and remember it. Here are some creative approaches you could use that involve your different senses:

Tip: Poor diet, stress, and lack of sleep have a negative effect on learning. You'll process information better if you take care of yourself with proper sleep, stress relieving breaks, exercise, nutritious brain food, and water (see [Tracking Your Success](#))

Examples of Study Techniques

Technique	Description	Example
Mnemonics	Translate information into another form that is easier to remember.	Cardinal Points on a compass (clockwise) <i>Never Eat Soggy Weetbix</i> = North, East, South, West
Rhyme	Use similar sounding words in regular patterns	Number of days in each month in a calendar year <i>30 days has September, April, June and November...</i>
Music	Turning facts and figures into new song lyrics for a familiar song	The story of the Trojan War in Homer's Iliad to the tune of Soft Cell's 'Tainted Love' (video, 3:15) created by History Teachers.
Smell	Choose a scent to associate with your study material.	Cinnamon for unit 1, lavender for unit 2, sandalwood for unit 3, etc. You could put some essential oil on your wrist while studying for a unit and do the same when you go to that unit's exam.
Mind Palaces	Associate items (numbers, words, concepts, etc.) with specific images, objects, or places that are familiar to you	Create a world where, for example: superhero characters represent letters and numbers (Batman = W) or movie scenes represent locations (Maximus walking in the country field in the movie <i>Gladiator</i> = ancient Rome) or associate concepts with your favourite sport team players to remember what you're learning.
Practical Experience	Actively apply what you're learning	For a music class, play the instrument. For a science experiment, test it. For epic poetry, perform it.

Pre-exam checklist

Avoid extra stress on your exam day: make a pre-exam checklist to plan ahead for crucial admin and logistical details.

Take a few minutes to think about your **travel logistics, essential exam equipment** (e.g. your Student ID), and the date, time and location of your exams (**your exam timetable**).

- What is your exam schedule? (Check **your exam timetable** and keep checking it until the exam in case it changes.)
- When and how will you get to your exam?
- What do you need to bring?
- What food and drink will you need and where will it come from?
- Where will you leave your bag during the exam?

Types of Exams	Study Tips
Essay Questions	Practice answering questions from past papers. Practice quickly planning an essay structure. Practice writing with limited time. Practice handwriting. Engage in understanding ideas/concepts and their connections, applying concepts to analyze new questions or situations, and evaluating ideas or approaches.
Short Answer Questions	Practice answering questions from past papers. If your textbook has exercise questions, practice with those as they usually have answers. Study in a group & test each other. Explain key concepts to others. Focus on remembering facts and basic concepts, understanding ideas or concepts, and how they are connected.
Multiple Choice Questions	Do all your unit MCQ quizzes (if available). Practice answering MCQs from your textbook (if available) as they usually have answers. Create flashcards (either paper or digital) for key concepts. Key skills include recalling or recognizing facts and basic concepts, understanding ideas or concepts, and identifying features of an example or situation.
Clinical Situations	Apply a technique(s) in a clinical situation. Explain or justify your decisions. Practice at every opportunity (e.g., in class) and reflect on the feedback you receive. Study with friends and practice with each other. Get familiar with any equipment you need to use.
Scientific Tests	Memorize the most important formulae. Get familiar with your scientific calculator. Practice working through scientific problems and logic questions. Skills needed include recalling information, applying formulae & logic, and performing calculations.
Open-book Exams & Take-home Exams	Organize your notes carefully so you can quickly find what you need. Practice answering questions from past papers using your notes, and reorganize your notes if needed. Create a detailed mind map of unit concepts to understand how it's all connected. Focus on synthesizing information, understanding and applying concepts, and making connections between concepts and examples.



General note-taking advice

There are just some aspects of note-taking that are going to be similar no matter what format you end up adopting. In this section, we're looking at some of those tried and tested elements that you need to keep in mind always.

Tips

Hand-written material really has a proven benefit. Research has shown (Pinola, 2011) that writing tells your brain to activate, wake up, and pay attention, whereas simply typing can become muscle memory and have less cognitive involvement.

Learn some abbreviations. If you haven't already, you'll soon be bombarded with a flurry of information. Getting some abbreviations under your belt will speed up the process of getting your notes down. There are many types of abbreviations and some examples are provided in Tables 1 and 2 below. At the end of the day it is really up to you to decide what types of abbreviations you use, just as long as you are able to understand what your notes mean.

For those of us that have found digital devices are our preferred learning method, it's time to get intimately familiar with keyboard and mouse shortcuts. These speed up your typing by eliminating needless physical movements and allow you to jump between and within applications more quickly. It might not seem much at the time but all those movements quickly add up in a day. Keyboard shortcuts also allow you to be more fluid and streamlined in the way you use your computer and cause less interruption.

Research and readings

It is 100% guaranteed that during your time at university you will be researching content for an assessment or exam and looking at journal articles and other readings. Taking notes on these is important and you need to find your 'groove' in the note taking world. In addition, the following brief points can help to further extend your note taking to readings. They can equally apply to the classes you attend, too!

Quotes versus paraphrasing

Use quotes when you need to draw on the authority of the author.
Paraphrase when you need to better understand the content in a different context.

Summary and personal thoughts

Write up a summary of the notes you've made, including quotes and paraphrased work. This allows you to clearly see the key aspects you've learnt.

Add your personal thoughts too. This allows you to 'think out loud' on the page and allows you to revisit your notes and understand the information in your own voice.

Referencing and citation

Provide the full reference to the best of your ability so you don't lose track of where the information comes from.

Cite while you write, even if they are just notes. This will allow you to easily go back to your content and follow up where you got the information from. This is invaluable when you're beginning to write up your assessments.

Portfolio/Reflection

Guess what... if you've gotten this far and implemented all these steps, there will be a billion and one new thoughts/concepts/ideas/facts buzzing around your head. What's even better is that maybe you've now captured them in a structured format and you've come away from your classes as an active rather than passive participant. You'll also be beginning to form creative ideas and opinions around all that you've learnt.

By starting a daily professional journal (which need only be five key points each day) you can quickly and easily capture these thoughts. More often than not, you might never need to refer back to them. But every now and again there'll be that nugget of information that will lead you to achieving that elusive HD in your next assessment or exam.

References

Pinola, M. (2011). Why you learn more effectively by writing than by typing. *Lifehacker*. Retrieved from <http://lifehacker.com/5738093/why-you-learn-more-effectively-by-writing-than-typing/all>

University of Adelaide. (2014). Note-taking abbreviations: Writing Centre learning guide. Retrieved from <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/resources/writing-resources>



Feedback hide and seek

Let's think about the last time a manager, teacher, friend, or stranger offered an evaluation of your performance. What did they say? How did you react at the time? How did it make you feel? What actions did you take to accept or ignore the input? More often than not, you will have recalled a negative or difficult feedback experience, so it's no wonder you have an aversion to proactively seeking criticism. But as Figure 1 shows, you'll benefit heaps if you push past those uncomfortable feelings and take feedback on board.



Figure 1. Where the magic happens is far from your comfort zone.

You should frame extrinsic (external) feedback, like intrinsic (internal) feedback (see [Track, progress, success](#), PDF, 107 kB), as an essential step in your development. Without the push-pull forces of the call to change, you may stagnate and fail to improve or move forward towards your goals. Important, long-term, and long-lasting change does not happen unless you track your progress. Think of feedback as a check-in point for yourself. Recognise it as a process and skill that will help you personally and professionally if you actively work on it.

Inviting evaluation

You need to decide what purpose feedback has for you. In most cases, people want to improve their future performance and opportunities by gathering advice that redirects or reinforces behaviours presently being performed. Once you've accepted your understanding of the purpose, you can address welcoming feedback and the stimulating way it can inspire you to take action!

Instead of viewing feedback as an insult, a hurtful criticism, or a signal of your failure, consider it objectively by separating the assessment from your sense of self. It is the writing, not the author, that is under review. Remember to see 'FAIL' as the **F**irst **A**ction **I**n **L**earning.

Self-assess

Imagine the upcoming return of assignment feedback or a performance management review at work. Before you receive written feedback, how do you think you went? Do you know the criteria against

which you are being evaluated? What rating and comments would you make in your self-assessment? This gives you the baseline you need to start tracking your performance and progress over time.

Compare

After reading through the feedback, what is your initial reaction? Is it fair? Do you agree? Is everything clear? What comments do you have? What questions would you like to ask? Do you need more information? Are your strengths identified? Are areas for improvement specified? Can you see how you might address these areas?

If you have questions, want more information, need clarity or examples, then you can contact the feedback giver for a meeting.

Reach out

When requesting further explanation, it is important to decide what kind of feedback you want, as this will impact the way you phrase your request and the way you interact when receiving additional feedback. Do you want to be encouraged and supported or do you want your strengths and weaknesses explicitly identified? Do you want the grade and performance measures explained or examples of how things could have been done differently and thus improved? Your request to discuss the written feedback provided should clearly identify the type of feedback you desire.

Prepare

When meeting to discuss an assignment, it's a good idea to assemble and thoroughly review all the resources supplied to you. This includes your assignment, the rubric (marking criteria), the feedback (via GradeMark, if applicable), the Originality Report (via Turnitin), the Studiosity feedback if you used the free service, and any feedback you may have received from a Study Smart Librarian.

Receiving Evaluation

In the feedback session you need to be prepared to welcome all comments. Are you ready for this? Complete the activity below.

Listen

People who have mastered feedback seeking know to listen to all comments without reacting to them in the moment. These people tend to write down the advice given to them, focus on understanding and gathering examples at the time, and address in-depth consideration later.

Active listening requires attention and concentration on the speaker, their words, their ideas as well as non-verbal communication cues. These include body movements (e.g. hand gestures, nodding head), posture (e.g. open and uncrossed arms and legs), eye contact (e.g. in Western culture, eye contact connection signals engagement), so called paralanguage (e.g. tone, pitch, and speed of speaking), space (e.g. sitting and standing a respectable distance from each other), facial expressions (e.g. smiling or frowning and blinking), and physiological changes (e.g. sweating).

Parrot

After listening to the comments, seekers paraphrase back to the feedback giver to signal their understanding of the advice. This process helps you to verify the information you have received and

begin to separate it from your own emotions as well as the sense of self that is often tied to your performance.

Example:

Student:

So, what I hear you saying is that I need to spend a little more time refining my database search keywords and boundary fields to ensure I target the specific assignment question parameters?

Lecturer:

That's right. You need to control the search from the very beginning and you need to know how to use the advanced search features to do so successfully.

Explore

Next the seeker actively asks open-ended questions, such as 'Could you give me an example of...?', instead of closed questions which only require a Yes/No response. This activity helps to further consolidate your interpretation of the evaluation and begin to build an action plan towards improvement in future performances. This step is particularly important if you feel the advice given has been unclear in any way. For example, if you are still unsure about which of your behaviours have been reinforced (i.e. things you did well), and which need to be redirected (i.e. things you need to improve), ask about your strengths and weaknesses with specific examples.

Acknowledge

Finally, after the back-and-forth discussion comes to a close, the feedback seeker expresses thanks for the feedback giver's time and contribution.

Dealing with evaluation

After your feedback meeting you should take time to do an individual debrief to reassess and plan ahead.

Reactions

To start, consider your reactions to this new information. How do you feel? Remember that emotions can be heightened in situations where we feel criticised. It's important to separate the criticism of the work from the sense of self. By doing so, you are better placed to harness feedback for your own self-improvement rather than self-deprecation.

Judgement

Then move on to assessing the advice given. Are the points reasonable? Do you agree with the strengths and areas of improvement that were identified? Do you want to accept all/some or reject all/some? Raising your awareness of the things you do well and the things that need attention not only helps you grow and develop but also to recognise where others can add value. This is incredibly critical when you work in teams or large organisations, where individual contributions help achieve communal goals.

Action plan

Finally, you can start to create an action plan to address the areas that need improvement. What did the feedback giver suggest? What other approaches, services, or support can you access to begin to look at this need? Who else could help you? What can you do to address this need? Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently next time? What will you avoid next time? What do you plan to make sure you do next time? What will you avoid next time? What do you plan to make sure you do next time? How will you know when you've improved?

The following table provides examples of the types of comments that markers may give you on assignments or verbally during a feedback meeting. Alongside these comments are strategies for developing ways to improve your work.

Feedback	Feed-forward strategy
'You haven't done enough reading and therefore your essay is poorly researched'	Use the Library to research relevant material – if you can't find appropriate material you may need to consult a librarian.
'You've given lots of information but you haven't really analysed the material'	You need to refrain from just using description in your essay, and instead apply critical thinking (PDF, 128 kB) and analytical writing skills to the topic.
'The parts of your essay do not seem to fit together very logically'	You need to have a clear understanding of the genre's structure in which you are writing. You need to be clear about the content and the line of argument you are developing. If you need help in planning essay structures, you could approach your tutor.
'It's difficult to understand the overall structure of your essay'	Your introduction should explain your overall structure. The body of the essay should be consistent with your introduction.
'You have made some good points but you have not substantiated them'	An essay should indicate that you have read to develop a conceptual understanding of the topic, and then this evidence is used to support your particular line of argument or discussion. Referencing these sources shows the reader that you have done both things.
'You have plagiarised parts of this essay from several sources! See me!'	It is important that you interpret the source material in your own words as a paraphrase, and where this is not possible, you use direct quotations. The lecturer needs to be able to see that you understand the ideas and concepts in your sources and that you can use these to develop your own argument.
'You need to improve your English language skills'	You may need to seek extra help to improve your English writing skills. The Library has many English language workbooks and textbooks that you can work through on a needs basis and at your own pace.
'Your essay is untidy and poorly presented'	You may need to allow more time after you have completed your essay to check for presentation details. You may also need to develop your word processing (PDF, 716 kB) skills.

More information

How to use feedback effectively: A guide for students (PDF, 771 kB). This is part of the **DEFT Toolkit** developed by the Higher Education Academy UK.

References

Poertner, S. & Miller, K. M. (1996). *The art of giving and receiving feedback*. Virginia Beach, VA: Coastal Training Technologies.

Contact Information

literacy@westernsydney.edu.au

Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia



[WESTERNSYDNEY.EDU.AU/STUDYSMART](https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart)