

# University Procedures and Skills for Succeeding at University

## 3 THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND TEACHING METHODS AT UNIVERSITY

### YOU'VE ARRIVED!

The teaching methods that you will encounter at university will differ depending on the size of the institution where you are to study and the subject that you take. However, here is some idea of what to expect and how to make the best use of these methods.

### LECTURES

There may be anything from 30 to 200 people attending a lecture and it will normally last not longer than an hour. You may, typically, have a lecture each week for each course of your study.

Lectures are used to give an overview of the topic. Usually students do not receive any personal attention in a lecture and may not have the opportunity to speak. You will listen and take notes whilst the lecturer speaks to you. They may read from their notes, write on the board, use overhead projectors to show you bullet points of key ideas. They may use films and they may show you images and information direct from the world wide web via a computer.



### Getting the most out of lectures

#### Before the lecture

Ideally, your course programme will give you information about the topic for the lecture and you will be able to prepare yourself by looking up the topic in a library book or your course text book. Look for themes and headings related to the topic and look up any unfamiliar technical words. If you are given suggestions for prior reading, then do it! Although you may find your preparatory reading does not make the topic 'gel', you will find that it will help you make sense of the lecture, whilst the lecture will help you to make sense of the reading.

#### During the lecture

Lecturers often speak very quickly and you will have to learn to take clear notes of key ideas, and not try to write down everything that is said. Good lecturers will identify their main topics for you at the beginning and you can write the headings down ready. Listen for clues as to when a key point is being made or when the lecturer is moving on to the next heading, e.g., 'Now, I want to consider...'. Use a 'spidergraph' system to take notes, or write your notes as headings and sub-headings and leave plenty of space to fill other detail in later. (See 'notetaking' section 3). It is better to keep listening, rather than to frantically write. If you absorb what you hear, your headings will act as memory joggers and you can write further notes in your own words later, perhaps with the aid of your text book.

- Note key words and phrases.
- Use clear headings, subheadings, underlining and circling.
- Leave margins and spaces so that you can add information later.
- Write your own questions, comments, criticisms on your notes.

#### After the lecture

- Go through your notes as soon as possible and try to fill in details and clarify any abbreviated bits. It is best if you can discuss the lecture with another student, and swap notes, so that you both get a clear picture. You may be tempted to rewrite your notes but you will soon find that there will not be time for this.
- Try to sum up the three most important points of a lecture. Which is the *one* most important point? Make brief notes of questions that arise from your consideration of the lecture so that

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you may either ask these in your seminar or tutorial, or try to answer them from your own reading.

- Make sure that you have labelled your notes, and any handouts, with the date, the lecture topic and the name of the lecturer. File the notes carefully for future reference.
- Use the information given in the lecture about references to other reading and also aim to consolidate and build on what you have heard by going back to your pre-lecture reading.

**You will get the most out of lectures if you are linking new information to what you already know, so some preliminary reading will give great extra value to your lecture.**

#### SEMINARS

A seminar group will generally involve a lecturer and a group of between 15 and 30 students. It will typically follow a larger lecture session and will meet at least once a week for between 1 and 2 hours. The seminar may take the form of traditional classroom teaching where the lecturer leads by delivering information and then asks the students to work in groups on set tasks. It may take the form of a large discussion. In any event, as a student you will be expected to take an active part and will grow in confidence as you find that you are able to contribute. Many students find that working in groups with their fellow students on an assigned task in a seminar is their most preferred experience of learning.

It is important to prepare for seminars by reading through lecture notes and by completing any background reading set. If you don't, you will find that you are at a loss and embarrassed during the seminar. You may be wasting your time, and that of other students, by attending. It is, of course, unfair to expect others to do the work for you!

#### TUTORIALS

These are usually used to give feedback on your work and to discuss your general progress. A

tutorial will involve the lecturer and either one student, or a small group of students. The tutorial may be timetabled on a regular basis, once or



twice a term, or you may be invited to make an appointment for an individual tutorial with your lecturer. It is important that you make the most of this infrequent opportunity for personal attention by preparing in advance any questions that you wish to raise or particular study problems that you may have and would like advice on.

#### PRIVATE STUDY

Perhaps the most striking change students encounter when moving on to Higher Education is the amount of time that they must spend in private study. This requires a great deal of motivation and organisation as, apart from timetabled lectures, seminars and tutorials, most courses require students to work on their own. You might spend this time researching in the library, reading and making notes and working on preparation for assignments, or it might suit you better to work at home. How you organise your time to ensure that there is sufficient for private study will depend on your individual lifestyle, but it will require good time management strategies. The independence and self-motivation required is both attractive and challenging.



- For further advice see **section :1 'WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU AND HOW TO ORGANISE YOUR TIME'- Time management.**

**APPOINTMENTS WITH TUTORS**

It is worth pointing out that university lecturers are employed to teach and support you. For this reason you should not be hesitant about seeking help and advice from them. Of course they have many demands on their time; you must recognise that you will need to make an appointment and that you may not be able to see someone immediately. You should not feel that you are making unnecessary demands or wasting people's time. It is often the case that tutors will allow specific blocks of time in each week to see students and they may advertise these times on their study doors. Examples of the kinds of things you might wish to see your tutor about could include:

- You unavoidably missed the lecture and would like to have copies of the handouts and a brief conversation about key points and work to be done.
- You do not understand an issue that has been discussed in class and need further help. (Of course you should first make your own efforts to clarify matters through your reading and by asking fellow students.)
- A marked assignment has been returned to you. You would like clarification of comments made by your tutor, or advice on ways of improving your work.
- You have a personal difficulty that is in some way interfering with your studies. You may require an extension to the deadline for an assignment.

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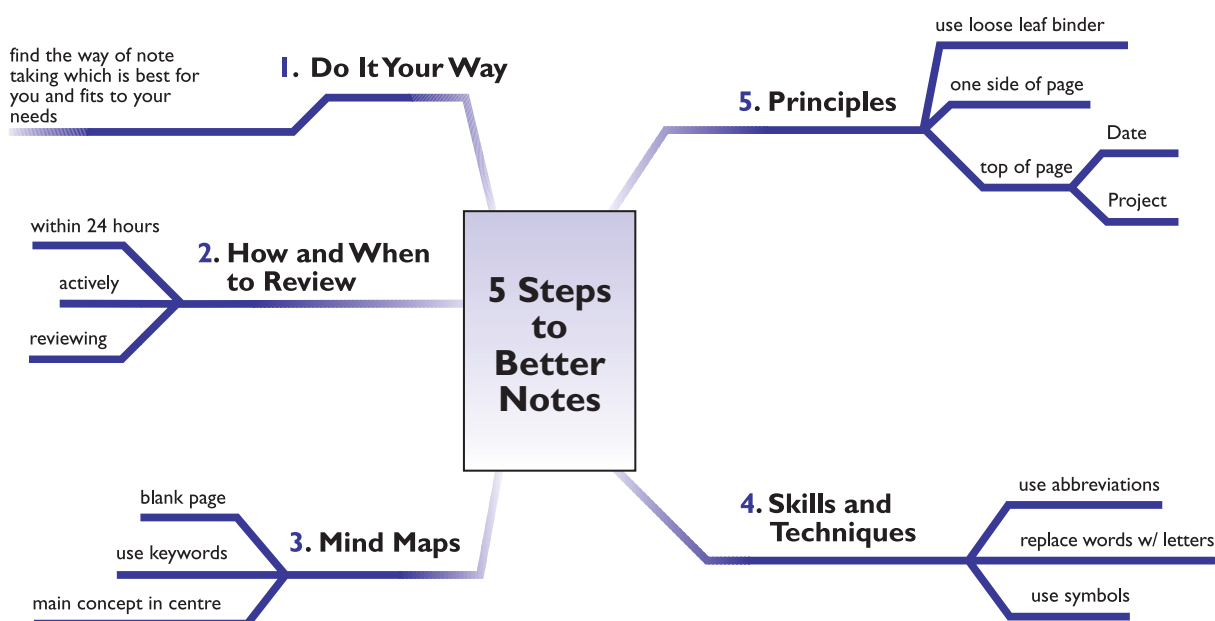
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#### NOTETAKING FROM LECTURES AND SEMINARS

It is quite common for people to take vast quantities of notes, to file them away and never look at them again. Some people will retrieve their notes and find that they cannot make any sense out of them. Note taking helps concentration during lectures and seminars. The notes may help you to come to terms with ideas and concepts. Some people find any form of note taking difficult. This may be because they think visually or verbally rather than through the written word. Try out different styles to see what system suits you best. There are a range of different ways to take notes but they fall into two basic structures:

1. **The spidergraph/gram:** This system works from a central idea and is connected through web-like links that provide additional information. This system may work best with material that you are hearing and may look something like this:



2. **Linear notes:** This system works by using numbers to jot down key points in an argument. It requires headings and sub-headings. Each stage in the argument should be noted by a sub-heading. You do not need to write out extensive notes, but find the core of the argument and write that down. This system works best when working from written material.

#### TEACHING METHODS

##### 1. Lectures

Gives overview of subject  
Prepare by reading before  
Review notes after

##### 3. Tutorials

Small groups  
Go prepared with issues/ideas

##### 2. Seminars

Classroom work  
Discuss in groups  
Make notes of others' comments

##### 4. Private Study

Time management  
Independence

Lectures and seminars are verbal environments. Lecturers will give you verbal clues, to help you know what it is important to note down. They may emphasise and repeat certain phrases as an indication. Lectures are designed to give an overview and are not the last word, or only word, on the subject so don't treat them as 'correct' information. After the lecture/seminar you can expand, organise, and file your notes.

#### NOTETAKING FROM BOOKS

- Equip yourself with the tools of the trade - reference books, specialist dictionaries, handbooks.
- Know your libraries and learning centres well.
- Start researching early.
- Use a page for notes on each section, concept, topic.
- Reference any quotation, book, article, or example, that you note.
- Start with the most recent sources.
- Start with general sources, work towards the specialist and detailed.
- Be selective about what you 'read' – use the index.
- Read for meaning and understanding.
- Be systematic and methodical, good work habits are essential.
- Structure your notes - use colour, spider diagrams, headings.
- Develop your own code of abbreviations.
- File your notes.



- *For further advice see section: 4 'OTHER RESOURCES AT UNIVERSITY' - Library.*





**WORKSHEET 3**

**THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE AND TEACHING METHODS AT UNIVERSITY**

**Task 1 Notetaking from verbal sources**

*If you don't have a lecturer handy (!) try using the television news, documentary programme, or a taped lecture as your source. You are aiming to produce notes that contain key ideas in a clear form so that you can organise and expand them.*

- Make a 'spidergram' of notes.
- Compare your version with that of a colleague.
- How do your versions differ?
- Discuss the advantages and problems with the methods you have used.
- How helpful are your notes?
- What might you do to improve on your technique?

*After discussion, re-write your 'spidergram'.*

*Now, using this, have a go at reorganising, and expanding the notes into the format as shown below in the second part of this activity.*

**Task 2 Writing up your lecture notes**

*Draw up an A4 piece of lined paper with the following headings allowing plenty of space between them. Try and complete this record sheet with the relevant information.*

**Subject:**

**Date:**

**Lecturer:**

**Subject of lecture:**

**Preparation:** Ideas and questions prompted by pre-lecture reading, own ideas on the subject etc.

**Opening comments by lecturer** – key topics, questions, issues, headings.

**Main theme of lecture:**

**Main points made in lecture:**

**Questions raised by the lecture or raised in your mind:**

**References to further reading:**

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#### Task 3 Private study strategies

Do you think the following study strategies are effective (E), will do (WD), or are ineffective (I) for the student who does the following:

1. Reads every book on the reading list.
2. Reads every book from cover to cover.
3. Writes very detailed notes.
4. Writes their notes very neatly and uses full sentences.
5. Works very long hours with few breaks.
6. Spends lots of time studying and friends think they are an excellent student.

How do they score, is their study method effective?

Are you sure? Let's consider those 6 methods again with a bit more insight:

1. Reads every book on the reading list, **but** the same kind of information is repeated in different books.
2. Reads every book from cover to cover, **but** not every bit of the book is relevant to their topic.
3. Writes very detailed notes, **but** this takes a huge amount of time. They have much more information than they need. The notes are repetitive although they 'look' nice. They are not thinking about what they are writing.
4. Writes their notes very neatly and use full sentences, **but** there will never be time to read through them all over again. They have not used abbreviations.
5. Works very long hours with few breaks, **but** they get tired and can't think clearly. They are bored and their mind frequently wanders. After reading a book, they can't remember most of what they have read or noted down.
6. Spends lots of time studying and friends think they are an excellent student, **but** they miss out on other people's opinions and discussion about the subject **and** they never have any fun!

**Think about**, and **discuss**, your own study strategies and how effective they are by considering what your own approach is to 1-6 above. **Discuss:**

- Are you aware of your study habits?
- Are you motivated to study?
- What are your motivations?
- Are you in the best frame of mind when you study?
- Are you active enough in your learning?
- When are you most effective?

Now, with your partner, compose 6 statements of advice to help the student above (and yourselves!)