

Essential Student Skills: Thinking about learning

Introduction

This section is designed to help you to understand what learning is, to identify your own learning style, and to move towards becoming an independent learner.

Objectives

By the time you have completed this section of essential student skills you should be able to:

- Understand the differences between studying and learning
- Know how to learn more effectively
- Understand the concept of an independent learner and how independent learning might help you



'thinking & working man' - [Shutterstock](#).

Studying versus learning

Studying

When you **study** you are taking the time to discover new things or extend your knowledge and **understanding** of familiar things. Study methods include questioning what you discover, as well as analysing and evaluating, in order to develop ideas of your own.



'Learning time' by Temari 09 from Flickr, used under an [Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic license](#).

When you have done all this, you may well be expected to communicate what you have studied and the conclusions you have come to.

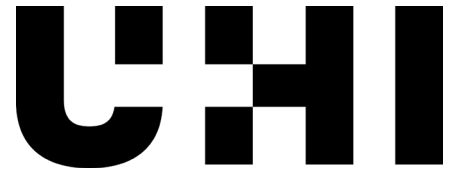
Learning

Learning has taken place when you can **do** something that you could not do before or when you can **demonstrate** that you know something that you did not know before; learning is applying.

Learning is most effective when there is a wide range of inputs and a wide variety of learning methods. The more learners are stimulated and involved, the more they learn and retain and the more they enjoy the process. If we learn and then apply what has been learned, we will retain what has been learned.

How to learn effectively

It is important to find an effective learning mode that suits you. Everyone is different so it is impossible for someone else to tell you what you should do to learn effectively.



Essential Student Skills: Thinking about learning

Personal preferences

- Some people work better in the evening, others learn best in the early morning.
- Some people like the radio on, others are driven to distraction by any noise at all.
- Some people thrive on time-pressure; others have to have everything done in plenty of time.

General points

Having said this there are some general points which might help you learn effectively:

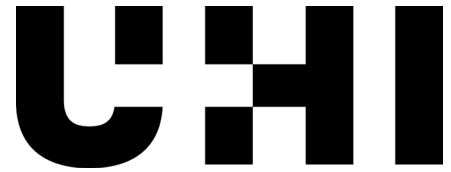
- Work in short bursts – no longer than one hour without a break
- Set clear goals for your study session – what am I going to do and why
- Make learning active - make notes, discuss what you have learnt, question what you have read, do the activities, go on the discussion boards and chat rooms etc.
- Have a study partner or someone to talk things over with
- If there is something you do not understand make a note of it so you can ask your tutor, email a friend or put a question on the discussion board
- Drink plenty of water and remember to eat
- If you realise that you are not taking anything in then do something else for a while
- Give yourself a treat when you get to a certain point (a cup of tea or a sweetie)
- Question what you are learning – do you agree with it?
- If you become very worried, email your tutor
- Review, review, review – what have I learned? How has this helped me? What should I do next
- End on a positive note – look at what you have done and feel satisfied.

What not to do

- **Don't** try to memorise everything
- **Don't** try to work when you are too tired
- **Don't** feel guilty if you are not working
- **Don't** worry about how much work other people are doing
- **Don't** be frightened to ask for help
- **Don't** spend a whole evening staring at the computer worrying that you can't work – do something else instead
- **Don't** leave everything to the last minute

How do you learn best?

Take some time to think about how you learn best. This is not necessarily just how you learn academically but also how you learn practical and everyday



Essential Student Skills: Thinking about learning

things. Everyone learns in their own way. Perhaps you use different strategies in different situations.

Find out *when and where* you learn best

Visit [Study Skills Guide: Find an Effective Study Location](#). Think about your preferred methods and conditions for studying/working.

If you are not certain you are studying as effectively as you could, think about how you can change your study arrangements (location perhaps?) to improve matters. You don't have to buy a new house, but perhaps you can study at different times of the day, listen to music while you study or study in a different part of the house where the noise level and lighting is more conducive to learning.

On a spare piece of paper complete the sentences below:

- **My study arrangements do/do not help me to learn because...**
- **I can change my study arrangements by...**

Learning styles

In the past, many in education have supported the notion that everyone has a particular learning style (visual, aural, etc.) and that if teaching materials are provided to them in this format, then they will learn more effectively. This is considered *common knowledge*. However, in recent years several studies (for example, Van Zwanenberg, Wilkinson and Anderson, 2000; Dembo and Howard, 2007; Riener and Willingham, 2010) have shown there is no proof that matching instruction to preferred learning style improves learning or stated outcomes. That is not to say that we should all be taught in the same way: we are all different; we have different interests; we all have a variety of background knowledge, and these differences affect learning.

We have preferences, but instead of always wanting or hoping to be taught in the same way, embrace the idea that "multiple representations of a concept are typically more helpful to learners than just one...studies show this to be true for all students, regardless of their preferred learning style" (Smithsonian Science Education Center 2023). Multiple representations and multiple learning methods engage *all* of your senses over time and this is going to help you learn more successfully.

In terms of how you are taught this could mean that at the beginning of a unit or module you are tested on what you already understand about certain concepts; in terms of how you are assessed, it could mean that some of your assessments involve group work, or a presentation component, or that you are given a choice between a written submission, a video and an audio recording. The same applies to how you study: **mix it up!**

"So here is the punch line: Students differ in their abilities, interests, and background knowledge, but not in their learning styles. Students

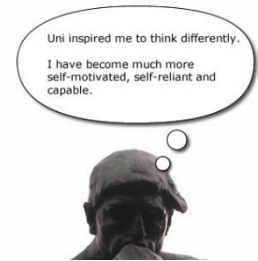
Essential Student Skills: Thinking about learning

may have preferences about how to learn, but no evidence suggests that catering to those preferences will lead to better learning”
(Riener and Willingham, 2010)

Becoming an independent learner

Students come from many different backgrounds and have a variety of life and academic experiences that will shape their attitude and their approach to their studies. Moving into higher education may involve taking a new approach to learning, taking a greater personal responsibility for learning.

In order to get the most out of your time at UHI it is worth thinking about how you can become an independent and assertive learner – qualities that will be invaluable to you now, to your employer later and throughout your life.



'Thinker' by dSeneste.dk from Flickr, used under an Attribution 2.0 Generic license

What does being an independent learner involve?

The table below indicates some of the features that characterise dependent and independent learning and as you can see the 'independent learner' shows a greater responsibility for their own learning.

	Dependent learner	Independent learner
Motivation to learn	You mainly respond to the pressures of the system. Driven by deadlines, penalties & marks.	You respond to deadlines etc but are also driven to extend your learning to meet your personal goals
What you learn	You rely on the content and resources indicated by your tutors.	In addition to the minimum content and resources you willingly seek out your own resources, do additional reading etc.
Managing your learning	You follow your tutor's instructions to the letter and don't go much beyond it. You feel this is enough.	You are keen to develop personal strategies for learning.
Reflection on your learning	Once a module or assignment is completed you move immediately to the next without reflecting on your learning.	You are keen to reflect on what and how you learn. You take measures to build on strengths and improve weaknesses.

Essential Student Skills: Thinking about learning

Tutors and support staff are there to help you to succeed but in higher education it is expected that students play an active role in their learning.

Being an independent learner involves:

- Being motivated to learn;
- Managing your learning;
- Reflecting on your learning.

These attributes will help you to become a successful learner and will give greater personal satisfaction in relation to your studies.

The responsibility for this is yours!

The table below indicates some of the features that characterise dependent and independent learning and as you can see the 'independent learner' shows a greater responsibility for their own learning.

Be motivated to learn	Manage your time	Reflect on your learning
Set challenging but achievable goals	Balance your studies, social life and any family and/or work commitments	Develop the ability to reflect on your progress
You rely on the content and resources indicated by your tutors	Use your time effectively and know where resources are	Carefully consider feedback from your tutors and peers
Take an active role in your learning	Understand how you learn best	Act on feedback to improve learning
Have a positive vision of attainment	N/A	Record how you are developing a wide range of skills

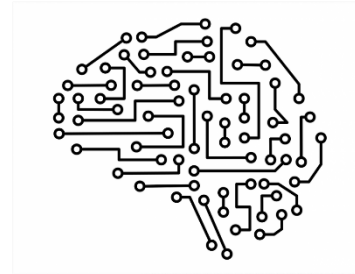
Many of these skills will be covered in greater detail in other sections of your induction.

Skills of time management, essay writing etc. can be developed with practice, but what is needed right from the outset of your studies is motivation and determination to succeed and willingness to take responsibility for learning.

Essential Student Skills: Thinking about learning

Conclusion

Adopting a learning style that suits you and embracing the independent learner approach will not only help you to succeed they but will also help you to get a real "buzz" out of learning something new. Skills and attitudes relating to being a responsible and independent learner will remain with you for life and are the type of graduate attributes that are highly desirable to employers.



[Pixabay](#)

The picture below is meant to represent the results of independent learning: 'joining the dots', making strong and lasting connections, forging lifelong skills.

It'll be worth it!

References

Dembo, M. H. and Howard, K. (2007) 'Advice About the Use of Learning Styles: A Major Myth in Education', *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 37(2), pp. 101–109.

Riener, C. and Willingham, D. (2010) 'The Myth of Learning Styles', *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 42(5), pp. 32–35.

Smithsonian Science Education Center (2023) *Sending learning styles out of style*. Available at: <https://ssec.si.edu/sending-learning-styles-out-style> (Accessed 20 June 2023).