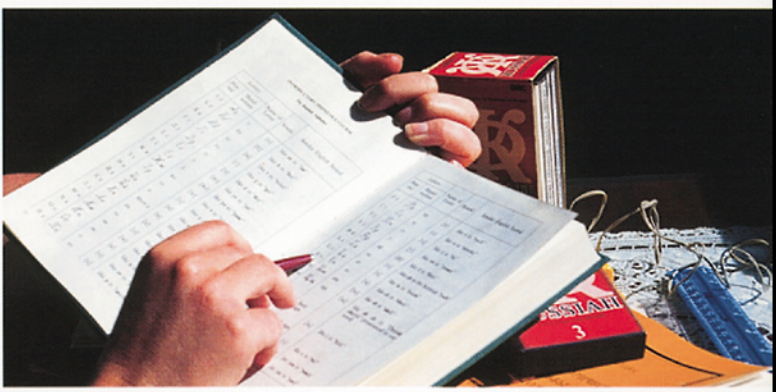
SECOND EDITION

ROUTLEDGE STUDY GUIDES

STUDY!

a guide to effective learning, revision and examination techniques



ROBERT BARRASS

Study!

Whether you go to college or university straight from school, study part-time, or return to study full-time after a period in other employment, to get the most out of your course you will need to develop effective learning skills. Whatever subjects you are studying, the practical advice in this guide will help you to achieve your goals.

Part One: Accepting responsibility for your learning will help you to look after yourself, organise your time and avoid stress.
Part Two: Student centred learning will help you to develop your ability to think, and to learn by listening, discussing, observing and writing.
Part Three: Revision and examination techniques will help you to learn and revise your work and to approach tests and examinations with confidence.

The clear straightforward advice will help you to keep fit for study, use effective learning techniques, and communicate your thoughts in assessed course work, tests and examinations. As well as these features, which contributed to the success of the first edition, this second edition includes more advice on working in groups, finding information, citing sources, and on using a computer to help you prepare essays, project reports, and short talks or presentations.

Robert Barrass has many years experience of helping students on degree and diploma courses at the University of Sunderland to improve their writing and other key skills. His best selling books on key skills include *Students Must Write* and *Scientists Must Write*, as well as *Study!*, all of which are published by Routledge – as is his new book, *Writing at Work*.

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A guide to effective learning, revision and examination techniques

Second Edition

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Preface

Students of all subjects are judged by their performance in course work, tests and examinations, yet most are given little or no advice on study, revision or examination techniques. Most tutors give advice only when they see that it is needed, and many students devote much time to learning but give little thought to improving their study skills. They continue to use the methods of learning that contributed to their success – or limited their success – at school. They learn from their own mistakes – if these are recognised – and pick up advice about study, here and there, as they go along.

Left to themselves many students learn to study effectively, but they may take several months to adjust to the differences between school and college or university. They continue to gather ideas and to improve their study skills throughout their student life, and so are much better students by the end of their course than they were at the beginning. However, many still have much to learn about study, revision and examination techniques at the end of their course. It is as if they had come to the end of the game and were still learning the rules. They may then feel, even if they worked hard, that they have not achieved their full potential.

Students who know that they are not doing as well as they could in assessed course work, tests and examinations, although they are working hard, are likely to benefit most from straightforward advice – because they know they need help. But students who are satisfied with their progress can also be helped to do even better work, just as talented athletes can improve their performance when well coached. So it would be best if all students, in the first few weeks of their course, were to consider how to use their study and

leisure time. Learning to work effectively (improving their ability to think, understand, select, organise, explain and remember) would help them not only as students but also in any career.

The advice in this guide to effective learning is to help students to think about the way they learn and, where necessary to improve their study, revision and examination techniques. They may read it chapter by chapter (rather than at one sitting) during the first weeks of a course, and then try the techniques recommended. Afterwards they may refer to appropriate chapters, for advice on particular points, throughout their course.

There have been many changes in higher education in the twenty years since I began work on the first edition of this guide. First, more students are now returning to study after a period of paid employment; more are working part-time to finance their full-time studies; and more are continuing their studies part-time while in full-time employment. Second, most students now use computers to help them with their learning – for information retrieval, for data analysis, and for word processing. And third, there is more emphasis on student centred learning, partly as a result of the increased use of computers. In this revised edition I have taken account of these developments, but have not made changes just for the sake of change. Tutors familiar with the first edition, who recommend this guide to their students, use it as an aid to counselling, or use it as a text to support their courses on effective learning or study skills, should therefore still find the information and advice that contributed to the success of the first edition and that continues to be relevant to students' needs. As in the first edition, suggestions for class work are listed in the index after the entry *Exercises and discussion topics*.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Because the following terms have different meanings in different countries, and even in different institutions in one country, they are defined here.

Assessor or *marker*: one who assesses the merit of a work and assigns a grade or mark.
Teachers: all those who teach in a school, college or university.
Lecturers and *tutors*: people who give lectures and tutorials in a

college (although many of them have other titles such as doctor and professor).
School or *high school*: an institution where pupils, up to the age of eighteen, take introductory courses.
College: an institution (college or university) where students take advanced courses.
Term: a period at college, between vacations (one third of an academic year).
Semester: half an academic year.
Class: any short organised period of instruction.
Module or *course unit*: a distinct part of a course of study, assessed separately from other units or modules included in the same course.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Jonathan Barrass for help in preparing this second edition, especially with the parts on aspects of information technology. I also thank Elizabeth Cunningham, independent IT Trainer and Consultant for reading the typescript for Appendix 3, and colleagues in the University of Sunderland: Library staff for help with information retrieval, Paul Griffin and Richard Hall of the School of Sciences for their interest and for advice on the use of personal computers and on health and safety, respectively, and Beverley Morgan of Learning Development Services for reading and commenting on the whole book in typescript. I also thank Ann, my wife, for her help and encouragement, and Adrian Burrows who drew the cartoons.

Some examples of unclear writing are quoted, with concise comments. As in the first edition, and like Gowers (see page 210), I do not acknowledge the sources of such extracts – but none is from the work of a student and some are from publications by senior academics.

University of Sunderland Robert Barrass
14 July 2001

Part 1

Accepting responsibility for your learning

Different people study effectively in different ways, so no one can tell you how to study, but knowing about ways of working that others have found useful should help you to improve your own study skills. You haven't time to learn only by experience, by making and correcting mistakes.

Obviously, the best time to review your study, revision and examination techniques is at the beginning of your course. You are likely to find the techniques used at school, where you were taught, are not good enough at college or university – where it is up to you to take responsibility for your learning – and you will want to do as well as you can from the start of your course.

1

Study: rules for the game

WHY STUDY?

Whatever your reason for continuing or resuming your studies, make the most of this opportunity to participate in college life, to develop your personality, to undertake more demanding studies of subjects in which you are already interested, to develop your ability to think, and to take examinations which will provide a challenge and a measure of your achievement.

Many students who withdraw from a course early, or fail in their examinations, do so because they are not well motivated. Think carefully, therefore, before deciding upon the kind of course to take (see Appendix A) and before deciding which subjects to study in each year of your course. Then remember that you are taking this course and studying these subjects because you chose to do so.

To maintain your sense of purpose it is best to have clear long- and short-term goals (see Figure 1.1). For example:

Long term: to progress in a particular career; to achieve grades at the end of your course that are a true reflection of your ability.

Short term: to devote enough time to recreation including your social life; to attend all classes; to complete homework on time; to do your best work.

Immediate: to recognize things that need your attention; to arrange these tasks in order of priority; and then to concentrate on one task at a time.

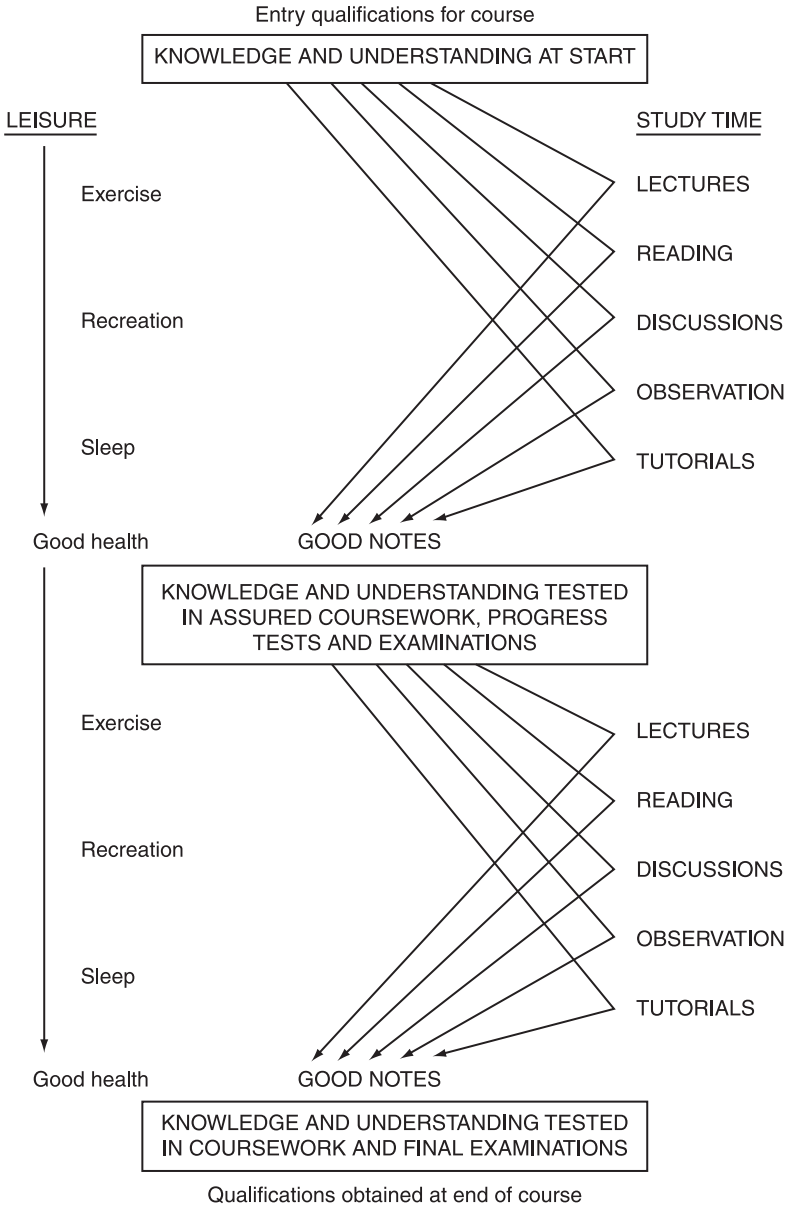

Figure 1.1 Charting your path through a college course.

ARE ALL YOUR SUBJECTS INTERESTING?

You will probably find some subjects interesting from the start, but others may not immediately seem relevant to your main subjects. Consider why these are part of your course. Recognise their importance to you; appreciate their relevance to everyday life or to different careers. Try to relate them to things in which you are already interested, and remember that they probably do provide a foundation for more advanced work in which you intend to specialise later in your course or as a career.

Most people encounter some difficulties when they start a new subject. For example, it may be necessary to learn new words and their meaning. You can develop a positive approach to your studies, in any subject, by being determined to master its special language and other fundamentals. One way or another, making an effort to learn about and understand a subject is your first step towards success in the subject.

You can develop your interest by devoting more time to a subject rather than less. If the lecturer does not capture your interest, look at relevant parts of your textbook which may provide a different approach. If you find your textbook hard-going, look at other books: you should be able to find one that is easier to understand and yet suited to your needs. If you still cannot understand, ask your tutor for help (see page 14).

Studying a subject is rather like fitting pieces into a jig-saw puzzle. It is easier to concentrate if you are interested, and as your interest grows you become more and more engrossed. The more you learn, the more you see the subject as a whole and the greater your understanding (see Figure 1.2). Mastering something that you at first found difficult also boosts your self-confidence in your ability to learn.

Pleasure in study comes from acquiring knowledge, from widening your experience, from developing your ability to solve problems or make judgements, and from your deeper understanding of, for example, works of literature or art, or of people, or of the world. Pleasure also comes from the better results achieved in course work and examinations.

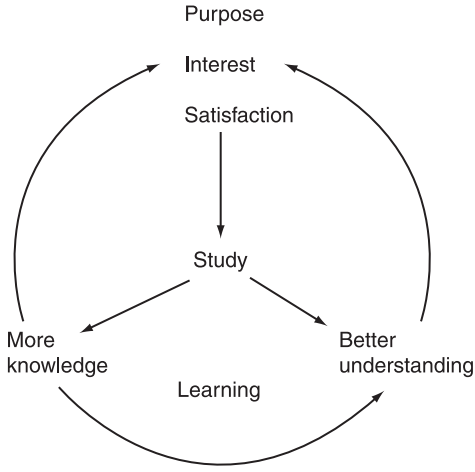

Figure 1.2 Links between interest, effort, knowledge and understanding.

DO YOU STUDY EFFECTIVELY?

Adopting effective study, revision and examination techniques is largely a matter of common sense: if someone suggests possible courses of action it is usually easy to decide which is likely to be the most effective. For example:

1 Do you sit trying to study but feel, after several hours (see Figure 1.3) that you have not achieved very much? Do you devote most time to the subjects in which most course work is set? Do you spend most time on your favourite subjects? Or do you work to a time-table, studying all subjects but spending most time (as suggested in this chapter) on those that most need your attention?
2 Do you think that being a good student is simply a matter of knowing how to study and how to communicate your knowledge and understanding? Or do you agree that it is just as important to look after yourself (see Chapter 2), and have a good social life (see Chapter 3), if you are to do your best work?

Study may be compared with a game: your purpose is not only to master your subjects but also to score points in course work and examinations. As in playing any game, the first step is to know the rules (see Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.3 Let your friends know when you will be studying – so that you will not be disturbed at these times.

Study skills

Part-time students must be well motivated, self-reliant, and able to work alone, but even full-time students should accept that they must take responsibility for their own learning. Whether you are studying part-time or full-time, think of yourself as working for a qualification rather than as being taught.

In addition to attending formal lectures and other organised classes, and sitting formal examinations, you will be assessed on the quality of your written course work: including short compositions and longer dissertations, extended essays, term papers, and project reports. The academic staff may advise, direct or supervise the work upon which these compositions are based, but these activities are intended to give students opportunities to develop their abilities: to

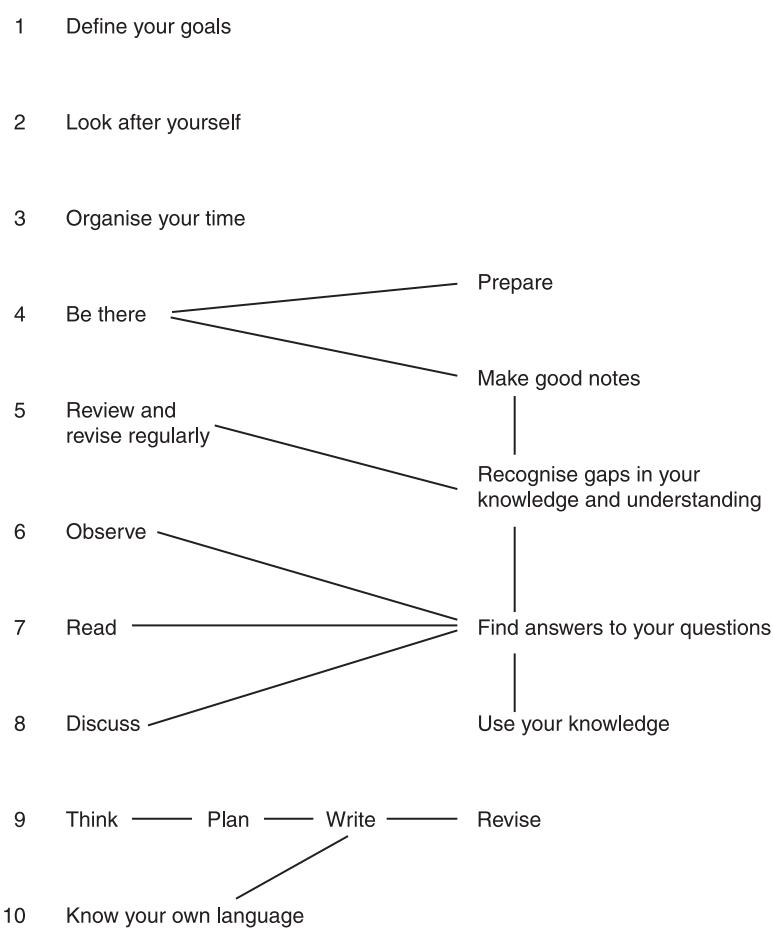

Figure 1.4 Rules for study

organise their time, to think for themselves, to co-operate with others, to make use of libraries and other resources, and to communicate their thoughts in speech and in writing.

If your long-term objective in study is to achieve your full potential, you must develop not only your knowledge and understanding of the subjects you are studying, and your interest in these subjects, but also the *personal skills* which – because they are the basis for success in any subject – are called *core skills* or *study skills*. Because they are needed for success in all careers, they are also called *common skills*, *enterprise skills*, *key skills* or *transferable skills* (see Table 1.1). It is perhaps because their importance is recognised by people with different interests (academics, employers and customers – as well as students) that they are given so many different names.

Table 1.1 Some skills needed in studying any subject and in any career

Personal skills	Why some students under-achieve
1. Self management	Not working hard enough, or poorly directed effort. Overwork. Personal problems. Problems with relationships.
2. Money management	Budgeting problems. Worries about money.
3. Time management	Lack of planning: ineffective use of time for study, recreation and rest.
4. Summarising	Inability to distinguish important points from the supporting detail. Not making good notes in organised classes and in private study.
5. Finding information	Not making good use of libraries and other sources of ideas and information.
6. Processing information	Not bringing together relevant information and ideas from lectures, tutorials, seminars, practical work, background reading, and other sources.
7. Problem solving	Not thinking things through to a satisfactory conclusion.
8. Thinking and creativity	Mindless repetition of other people's thoughts: unwillingness to consider new approaches or different points of view.
9. Communicating	Not expressing thoughts clearly, concisely and convincingly when speaking and writing.

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