

Royal Holloway
University of London

SCHOOL OF MODERN LANGUAGES,
LITERATURES AND CULTURES

ACADEMIC SKILLS HANDBOOK

Acknowledgements: The advice and suggestions contained in this booklet are based upon the work of Dr Shân Wareing, Dr Mike Routledge, and upon guidelines devised by Professor Robert Lethbridge. Content and other teaching and learning materials were further developed by Warren Riches.

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INTRODUCTION: STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY

Studying at university requires many skills, some of which will be new to you. In addition to mastering the one or more languages, understanding and using it/them with a professional concern for accuracy and register, you will develop skills such as:

- the ability to work on your own and in groups
- meeting deadlines
- undertaking research for a project
- problem-solving
- critical and creative thinking
- formulating logical arguments supported by evidence
- producing written and oral presentations

As the curriculum is progressive, so it will take you four years to develop fully all the skills involved in your degree. No-one expects you to get everything right first time, but the advice and tuition you receive from members of the School are designed to encourage you to think about the ways in which you can develop your skills. If you experience initial difficulties, you should ask for help and advice from members of the teaching staff: from course tutors, course convenors, and from your Personal Adviser. This handbook is intended to provide some signposts to get you started along the right track.

You can help yourself improve by learning from your mistakes, and especially by using the feedback you receive on your coursework:

- ⇒ Look at the comments your tutor has made, and at any notes or corrections on the work itself, in order to identify areas which can be improved next time.
- ⇒ Use the assessment criteria contained in your student handbooks to help you understand why your work has received a particular mark, and what else you can do to get a better mark next time round.
- ⇒ If you don't understand why your work has received the mark it has, or if you are not sure what you need to do to improve, ask the course tutor or your advisor for help.

Computing and IT skills

If you are not confident about using email, the internet, word-processing and other software packages, you can develop your IT skills through the BITS course, run by the Computer Centre. The course lasts about 15 hours, spread throughout the first term and is repeated in the second term: ask at the Computer Centre about registration.

SECTION 1: TIME MANAGEMENT

At some point everyone manages their time badly. This often produces missed deadlines; feelings of anger, frustration, stress; feeling that you're always being in a hurry, and as if you never have time for the important things in life; and also in work done less well than you'd have liked.

But you **can** find ways of coping better, of feeling in control of your life, and of having enough time for the things that matter to you.

DIAGNOSING THE DIFFICULTIES

Identify in what areas of your work / life you would like to be able to manage your time better. What are the results of not managing your time as well as you would like? In what respects do you think you already have good time-management skills?

Some suggestions

- **Keep a diary**

For some people, keeping a diary will already be second nature. However, for others, studying in higher education will be the first time it has become really necessary to keep a diary. Choose a format that suits you; diaries come in all shapes and sizes, including ones that cover the academic rather than the calendar year, electronic ones and filofaxes.

Write in all pre-set appointments - such as tutorials and lectures, and sports activities. Add all other appointments as you make them. Carry the diary with you: it will help you see at a glance what you have to do, and prevent double-bookings.

- **Make a timetable early on**

Make a time plan or timetable well in advance of your deadlines; for example, at the beginning of the term. Include all unavoidable academic/work/family commitments; time for relaxation, exercise or social events; exam dates and times, and the times you can set aside for study, revision and library visits. It's worth doing this early, because people often find that by the time they include their course work and other commitments, they have far less time than they thought. It's much better to find this out while there's still enough time to do something about it! Make sure your timetable is realistic or you won't be able to stick to it, and you'll end up feeling even worse.

- **Prioritise**

- What do you need to do right away?
- What do you definitely need to allow enough time to do?
- What would it be helpful to do if you have time?
- What can you ignore/do differently/share with someone else?

When you've got a heavy workload, try to identify tasks according to the categories given above. Give yourself deadlines for all the tasks - such as 'today', 'by the end of the week', 'by the end of the month'. This can include more nebulous tasks like thinking or planning - for a big piece of work, it's important to put aside time which is *just* for planning and exploring ideas and approaches.

You may find the 'To do' list at the end of this section useful for this task.

- **Recognise your own preferences**

Part of using your time effectively involves recognising your own preferred times of working, and the ways you work best. For example, you need to know the answers to these questions:

- Do you work better early in the morning or late at night?
- What is the maximum amount of time you can work for productively?

It helps if you identify which kinds of activities you are best at doing at different times of the day. Most people have a point in the day when their energy levels are highest, and that's the best time to tackle new or difficult work, or something you have been putting off because it makes you anxious. On the other hand, we all have periods of 'low ebb' and it's best to have something mechanical to do at those times (for example, writing up notes, tidying your files). Don't waste your most productive slots doing things like tidying or ordering, or else the more difficult parts of your revision will never get done! If you think you work long hours but don't achieve much, it may be because you give easier, less important tasks too much time and then don't have enough for more challenging, more important work.

Make a list of the **demanding tasks** which will be best done when you feel most **alert**, and **routine tasks** which you can do when you're feeling **sluggish**.

- **Short bursts of study are the most effective**

Divide your study time into around 45-minute slots. Decide what it is you are going to find out in that time. Clearly mark your goal. On achieving your goal, you should then break for ten minutes or so before starting again. **You should attempt to write down what it is you have achieved** in the past forty-five minutes, however briefly, before you break. Jot down your ideas in note form and re-read when you begin your next session.

- **Monitor your own progress**

If you are working very slowly and not very effectively, try approaching the topic in another way, for example, a different book, work with a friend, invent some questions to try and answer, tackle something else for half an hour.

- Getting started**

If you have trouble getting started, try making a list at the end of every session you spend studying, of what you need to do next time. Leave the list on your desk or in your folder. You may find it helps to give yourself a short easy activity to do first, as a warm-up and the main / most difficult task second.

Try making a '**Things To Do**' list on which you can add tasks as they arise, and then tick them off. Photocopying the chart over the page onto bright paper (red or yellow, for example) will ensure you can find the sheet on your desk!

THINGS TO DO

DATE:

Task	Target date	Done

Write it - don't try to remember it!

SECTION 2: LANGUAGE STUDY

Learning to speak, read and write fluently in a foreign language takes hard work and practice. If you want to improve your language skills, you must spend time working independently on your vocabulary, grammar, and syntax.

You will need:

- a good grammar book,
- a bilingual dictionary,
- a monolingual dictionary

Ask your language tutor for advice about which to buy if this information is not provided at the start of your language course.

• Vocabulary

To extend your vocabulary, you can work with all sorts of different texts – newspaper or magazine articles, novels, poetry and so on.

- ⇒ Go through the text and highlight:
 - a) unknown words that you do not understand
 - b) unknown words that you understand in context
 - c) Words which seem to have a different meaning from the one(s) you are used to.
- ⇒ Checking the meaning(s) of any such word *and* its synonyms [words which mean the same], antonyms [opposites], connotations and pronunciation in your monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, and make a note of this. In this way you can build up a bank of words and terminology on different themes as you work on different documents.
- ⇒ Always try to 'learn one, get one free'. Look at the words or set expressions near the one you have looked up and see if you can find one that is linked in some way, so that learning both takes hardly any extra effort.
- ⇒ Remember that looking a word up is only the first step in the process of learning it. You need to try to memorize it actively, and this rarely happens effortlessly. Think of a mnemonic, a mental picture (draw it in your vocab. notes if you like), say it aloud, copy it out several times... some or all of these techniques will be needed for much of the new vocabulary you come across. Also, remember the 'use it or lose it' saying; if possible, try to make a point of working the new word or phrase in when you are next speaking or writing the language.

- **Grammar & Syntax**

Basic grammatical rules are revised in all the Year 1 language courses,

and by the end of the first year you should be confident in understanding and using basic grammatical features, in particular the ways in which words are modified to indicate gender, case, tense, or mood.

⇒ Make your own file of grammar points: when you come across a new grammar point, make a note of the basic rule, and you can then add to this with examples, counter-examples and exceptions, as you come across them in different contexts.

⇒ You can also build up your own files on specific syntactical features: for example, making a list of all the verbs used with a particular preposition or a list of the expressions followed by the subjunctive mood.

It is one thing to understand the rules of grammar and syntax, but another to be able to use them with ease, and for this you need regular practice. You should make full use of the grammar exercise books recommended and of the CALL laboratory software programmes.

To make sure that you do regular grammar practice, decide upon a set time each week when you will go and do some exercises in the CALL lab, or work through a section of a grammar exercise book, then stick to this timetable.

Writing in French, German, Spanish, or Italian

Your written language will be assessed on its linguistic accuracy, the appropriateness of register and style, depth of analysis and logic of argument. There are a number of points you should bear in mind:

- When in doubt, *always check* the spelling and gender of a word; the agreement of a verb, a participle, an adjective (etc); the construction of a verb; the tense needed; the punctuation needed.
- *Watch out* for anglicisms and literal translations of idiomatic expressions - (sometimes known as 'calques').
- *Make sure* that you write in a register appropriate to the document
- *Check* the clarity, concision and logic of your argument: are the links between different points clear? Are you sure you have not repeated the same point several times when once would be enough?
- When your work is finished, put it to one side for at least an hour or two, then go back and read through it carefully to pick up any mistakes that you may have missed first time round.

Speaking in French, German, Italian, or Spanish

When your spoken language is examined, you will be expected to speak accurately and in an appropriate, sometimes formal register, expressing yourself clearly and logically. Many people are very nervous about speaking in a foreign language, especially in front of the whole class, and feel embarrassed about making mistakes. Try to remember that everyone in your class has different strengths and weaknesses and don't be put off if some of your classmates sound more fluent than you – with practice you will start to sound just as confident as they do!

The best way to improve your conversation skills is to spend time in an immersion environment, and your Period of Residence Abroad is very important for developing your oral skills. In the meantime, if you find speaking in class very intimidating, the following may help:

- Practise with a friend to build up your confidence.
- Start a conversation exchange with a foreign student who wants to practise their English – ask at the Language Centre for help in finding an exchange partner.
- Spend time regularly listening to correct native speech (radio, television, the lectors), and paying particular attention to the pronunciation and the intonation patterns of typical sentences.
- Speak to your course tutor and explain that it is nerves, rather than laziness, which prevents you participating fully in class. Ask them if they can help you build up your confidence gradually – maybe answering one question this week, two the next week and so on.

Resources for language learning

Newspapers in French, German, Italian, and Spanish are available for you to read every day in Café Jules (past editions are on the CD-rom network). Similarly, weekly magazines (all available in Founder's Library)) offer more articles on various topics involving national and international current affairs or about a social or cultural topic in their countries.

Many foreign newspapers are available on the **Web**, as well as sites about everything from football to fashion, via music, cookery, cinema and politics. You can start by consulting the different languages' web pages and following the links. You may also find the web useful as a source of information for your coursework essays – remember to include in your bibliography the URL of any websites you have used in your research or referred to in your coursework.

Where you can, watch and listen to foreign **TV and radio** stations which are also available on-line or you may be able to pick up some at home, especially if you have Long-Wave radio. Your language level will improve immensely if you make a habit of listening to the radio and/or watching television on a daily basis. News reports, in particular, will help you improve your aural comprehension as the different news topics give a straightforward structure to these programmes.

Working with a written or a recorded document

The following steps will help you work through a document such as a magazine article, a short story, song lyrics, etc.

- i. Read through or listen to the document at least twice, trying to work out the overall meaning.
- ii. Ask yourself the following questions: Who is speaking or writing? Who is involved? What is happening or reported? Where and when is it happening?
- iii. Now look at the structure of the piece. Is there a clear introduction and conclusion? What structuring or linking words are used? How are the ideas or events joined together? With recorded material, pay attention to the use of different pauses and intonation patterns to punctuate conversation, an interview or a report.
- iv. Looking at the vocabulary, grammar and syntax, think about the style and register of the document studied. Is it very formal, pedagogical, or literary? What sort of reader or audience do you think it is aimed at? How does the style of the document affect your reaction to it?
- v. Have you made a note of any new vocabulary, grammar points, or unusual syntactic structure

SECTION 3: LECTURES & SEMINARS

The majority of teaching during your degree will take the form of lectures and seminars: attendance at both is compulsory.

LECTURES

Lectures are usually centred around a presentation, by the lecturer, of key aspects of the topic you are studying. They are designed to provide a context for your study and to open up critical perspectives on the material you are working on. Lectures are also an opportunity for important information about coursework, reading lists, exams and so on to be given to all students.

Although the lecturer may provide a handout with quotations etc., you will also need to take notes during the lecture. This will help you to focus on what the lecturer is saying, but don't try to 'get it all down' verbatim as if you were taking dictation. You should be listening, above all, and **making your own notes** in a form which will be useful to you when you return to them. The advice given in Section Four of this guide will help you take notes which will be genuinely useful to you.

If you would like the lecturer to repeat something you haven't quite understood, to explain further, or to write something on the board, don't be afraid to raise your hand and ask him or her to do so.

Preparation:

- ⇒ Lecturers will assume you've already done the necessary reading of primary texts, and you will get a lot more out of the lecture if you are already familiar with the material being discussed.
- ⇒ Think about what you have read, and what you learnt in previous lectures and seminars. If there is anything you are unsure of, or haven't quite understood, then the chances are that you are not alone. Make a note of it and ask the lecturer to explain, and your fellow-students will also appreciate it.

SEMINARS

What is a seminar?

Seminars are usually sessions when instead of the tutor giving a formal lecture, they open topics for discussion. It is an opportunity for students to discuss their ideas with one another. Some seminars are tightly structured; others are much more flexible. Students will often be expected to make presentations, individually or in groups (see the section on presentations), or sometimes the seminar might take the form of a discussion based around a particular topic or an extract from a text. Don't expect the tutor to do all the work for you – his or her role is to coordinate the group's discussion, relating it to the themes and aims of the particular course. You may find it useful to take notes during seminars, but it is far

more important that you gain a greater understanding of issues by thinking about them and testing your ideas in discussion.

Why participate?

Talking about ideas and arguing points is one of the best ways of learning. The more you get involved, the more you'll learn. You will enjoy the whole process more if you join in. To join in effectively, you really need to do some preparation.

Taking part

Listening and speaking are both important, although speaking is more 'glamorous'. It's important to monitor how much you contribute and try to be fair; pull your weight by talking, but do not dominate by talking too much. If you find yourself doing a lot of the talking, you can bring the rest of the group back into the discussion, for example, by asking someone a question.

If you find it hard to contribute, plan your question beforehand, and try making a comment first on a 'safe' topic to get used to the sound of your own voice. If you feel the seminar is dominated by one or two people, you can arrange a strategy with other students for dealing with the situation. For example, interrupt the dominating speakers by saying 'What do you think, Karen?' addressing one of your co-conspirators, or 'Jean-Pierre had a good idea about this, didn't you?' giving someone else a chance to talk.

Listen to what other people are saying; you may not agree with the point, but it doesn't mean it's not an important consideration. Practise making your point, whilst acknowledging someone else's viewpoint. These are useful skills to have in any case, wherever you are, and ones that employers increasingly emphasise.

Preparation

If you have been set a task, such as reading or thinking, before the seminar, it's worth taking this seriously and spending time on it. If not, it's worth looking at any materials you've got about the seminar and thinking about the topic and what you already know about it/how you react to it. If you were in business, you wouldn't expect to turn up to a meeting without doing any preparation. If you did, the people who had prepared would get everything their own way because they would be able to control the agenda, and you would be left out of pocket and frustrated. Exactly the same happens in academic seminars. People who prepare have the most to say, and people who haven't often end up feeling excluded and fed up.

⇒ When you are preparing, ask yourself questions about the topic, or your reading; think about when the text was written and by whom? What are its biases? What's your view?

⇒ Look back at your notes from previous lectures and seminars – is there anything you would like to discuss further, or that you're not sure you understood or noted down correctly? If so, make a note of it and ask your tutor in seminar.

SECTION 4: TAKING NOTES IN CLASS

You will often need to take notes while you are studying, and it is also a skill you will use after you complete your course. Many people find it difficult to take notes effectively. This section aims to help you take more useful notes with less frustration.

Have you ever taken notes that (tick the ones that apply):

- are illegible?
- are incomplete?
- don't say what book or lecture they are based on?
- are not in sequence?
- can't be found when you need them?
- are inaccurate?
- never get looked at again?

If you ticked more than a couple of these, you may think you are not a very good note-taker. But taking good notes is very hard. Some of the problems are listed below. Tick any you think apply to you:

- you can't write as fast as your lecturer can speak;
- you can't write notes and listen at the same time;
- you can't write notes and think at the same time;
- you can't read your writing when you write fast;
- you can't always tell what you should be writing down;
- sometimes you can't tell what your notes meant a month later;
- it is easy to muddle up your copied notes with your own ideas and find yourself unintentionally committing plagiarism.

You may be wondering by now, why bother taking notes at all? To take a more positive approach, tick any of the following that you think apply to you, and add any other reasons you have for taking notes at the bottom.

- note taking helps you **concentrate**;
 - note taking helps you extract the **main points** from the lecture or the text;
 - your notes help you to **understand** a topic when you think about it later;
 - you use your notes for ideas when you are writing **assignments** or for **exam revision**;
 - your notes contain **key information** such as dates, names, research projects and book titles;
-
- you use your notes to help you decide **what to read next** and where to find it.

How to make good notes ... in lectures and seminars

- i. The **more you know about a topic** before your seminar or lecture, **the easier it will be to take notes**. This is simply because there won't be so much new information, and you will know to a greater extent what to expect. So, one way to improve your notes is to check the title of the session beforehand, and do any reading you've been recommended.
- ii. **If you are given handouts, it can be easier to make notes on these**; you'll need to write less, because some of the information will already be on them. For example, you may not have to write the date and the title of the lecture if this is already printed out. You can make a note of your thoughts and reactions alongside quotations or the outline.
- iii. You'll need to write down the **date** of the session, its **title** and what **course** it belongs to. You will also need to **number** every sheet to keep them in order, and it can help to put the **date** on every sheet in case they get mixed up with other notes later. You can do this before the lecture/seminar starts.
- iv. Listen for the **cues to the structure** of the seminars or lectures. For example, is the lecturer dealing with two opposing theories and then demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of both? Are they describing in depth one theory which they will go on to apply? What point does the case study illustrate? The kind of cues to listen for are ones like: '*I'll give you an example...*'; '*There are three points supporting this...*', '*In conclusion...*'. Track this structure in your notes and they'll be easier to understand later. You'll get better at doing this with practice.
- v. **Don't write sentences** (these take too long and have lots of unnecessary words). Instead write down **key words**. These are much quicker to write. By listening for the most important words, people actually remember more of a lecture afterwards. Keywords are the ones which carry most information. The key words of this handout so far are mostly those in bold.

- vi. Think of good **abbreviations** to use. These can be **symbols**:

+	<i>and</i>	%	<i>percentage</i>
/	<i>or</i>	∴	<i>therefore</i>
<	<i>less than</i>	>	<i>greater than</i>
+ive	<i>positive</i>	-ive	<i>negative</i>
=	<i>equals is the same as/means</i>		
@	<i>at</i>		

or **shortened** forms. Any words you use regularly can be shortened to a key letter or symbol: LC for literary criticism; FR French Revolution; F for Freud; P for patriarchy. However, it is important not to be too creative or you won't remember what your abbreviations stood for!

- vii. Think about using **space on the page** and other **visual prompts** to make your notes clear. Underline key words or put them in capital letters. Draw boxes round them. Draw lines between words to show connections. If your lecturer makes a point and then gives five examples, draw a box round the key point, then jot down the key words from each example, drawing a line back to the main point to show the connection. Use a highlighter pen to pick out the most important words.
- viii. Some people take their notes as **mind maps** or **spider diagrams**: the title of the lecture in the centre of the paper with all the ideas covered in the lecture in bubbles radiating outwards, with subsidiary bubbles radiating off them.
- ix. Some universities suggest their students **divide an A4 page in half** to take notes. On the left hand side you write down your key words and ideas from the lecture. On the right hand side, you put your personal comments - questions, opinions and ideas. This can be very useful as it reminds you that you aren't just there to accurately copy down information, **you are there to think about it too**.
- x. Go back to your notes within 24 hours to **fill in any gaps**, rewrite unclear words, or add any thoughts you had about the subject matter. They will still be in your short term memory then - after that they'll probably be lost for ever! **Tidying up your notes is usually more useful than rewriting them**, which uses up a lot of time.
- xi. **Check your notes with a friend**. This allows you to fill in any information they got but you didn't, to check the accuracy of your notes, and to discuss any points that weren't clear. Doing this for 10 minutes over a cup of coffee will be of enormous benefit to you in the long run, because you will understand the topic much better.
- xii. Don't be afraid to **ask the lecturer to spell words, repeat dates, leave overheads up for longer** and so on. You will probably represent the needs of a large proportion of the group if you do.
- xiii. If you have **a visual or a hearing impairment, or you are dyslexic**, you may want to let the lecturer know so they can make sure that they don't block your view or talk with their back to you.

They may be able to let you have notes or copies of the overheads beforehand to study.

- xiv. **Experiment with different kinds/colours of pen and paper.** Some people find they write more clearly in purple or green than in blue or black. Other people prefer fountain pens or pencils. Some people find the glare from white paper distracting and using differently coloured paper for different course units makes jumbled papers at the end of the day quicker to sort out.
- xv. **Experiment with how you keep your notes;** you could try a bound notebook, or loose sheets of A4 which you can file in a subject folder, or a spiral bound notebook with smaller sheets. Try plain paper, different line spacing or coloured paper with little squares. Different things work for different people but using a slim file which you can carry to classes means you haven't got to file notes when you get home into a cumbersome arch lever file, a job which you might easily fall behind on as the pressure mounts.

SECTION 5: READING

Reading is an essential activity when studying at university level, but you can waste a huge amount of time by not doing it effectively. For example, do any of the following statements apply to you?

- I feel intimidated by the length of the reading list/difficult titles.

- I get out as many of the books on my reading list from the library as I can.
 - I find it hard to start reading because the pile of books I've collected is off-putting.
- Reading always takes so much longer than I expect, I never have enough time to read and prepare my assignment.
- I often realise I've been turning the pages and not really taking in what I've been reading.
- It's hard to decide what to make notes of when I read.
- I often read things I don't really understand and find it difficult to use effectively (e.g. in an assignment) afterwards.

These are really common reactions, but there are ways to become more efficient and more effective when you read. Here are some guidelines to help you use your reading time as well as possible.

- i. Don't just plunge in to everything you can find from your reading list. You need to **plan your reading** to get the most out of it. Check the books and articles you have found for:
 - (a) how difficult you judge them to be;
 - (b) how useful you judge them to be;
 - (c) how much of them you will need to read;
 - (d) what proportion of your valuable time you should spend on them;
 - (e) their date of publication (are they up to date? Is the time at which they were written significant to their content?);
 - (f) whether they are collections of essays by experts, text books, or books on an author's original research.
- ii. Now you have got some idea of the complexity and the content of these texts, **select which books/chapters/articles** you are going to read. Introductions and conclusions are very useful because they often summarise the writer's argument. Use the index and the glossary if there is one; you may find it useful to keep a reference book to your subject next to you (a dictionary of terms or an encyclopaedia, for example).
 - A useful strategy is to start by **quickly skimming** the section you are going to read, to get the main points and some idea of the structure. Check the chapter titles, the key points made in the introduction, the final points made in the conclusion.
 - Next, **set yourself some tasks** related to the reading; for example, set yourself three **questions** to answer. These could be, for example,
 - (a) what is the author's main point?
 - (b) what is their evidence?

(c) what are the flaws in their methodology?

Or you could look for which sections of the article are based on other people's publications and ideas, and which appear to be original to the author.

- Then **read the text, looking for the answers** to your questions. The purpose of the questions is to help you focus; you will notice if you stop paying attention because you won't be able to answer your questions! By having something concrete to do as you read, you are also more likely to understand the text.
- As you read, **make notes or annotate the text** to help you remember the main points. Write down the answers to your questions, and any other ideas which occur to you. It is not usually worthwhile copying long quotations out. If they are really important, photocopy them and write your comments in the margin.
- If you feel you aren't concentrating very well, perhaps the text you are working on is too demanding at the moment. If you can find an introductory text, or a general reference text on a similar area, it may give you the background knowledge you need to understand the more difficult one.
- You will usually need to read one or two texts in real depth, all the way through, thinking hard about what is meant and what the implications are. You should start to speed up after that; the more background knowledge you have, the quicker you will be able to read. If you become an 'expert' in the area, you will be able to read articles very quickly because you will really just be checking whether there is anything new in them/how it fits into existing knowledge in the field.
- **Reading in a foreign language** presents special problems. If you look up in a dictionary every word that you don't understand, you will waste valuable time. Instead, read to the end of the sentence and return to the problem word to see if it makes sense in context. If it does not, read a couple of more sentences or to the end of the paragraph and then return to the word. Only then should you look it up, if you still don't understand it. A useful technique is to buy a list

of basic vocabulary (about the 2000 most common words), and look the word up there first.

Each time you look it up, make a mark next to the word. If you have to look it up more than once, you will have more than one mark next to the word, and you will then have a handy list of *your* 'problem words' that you can then focus on memorising. More advanced words will have to be looked up in a dictionary. Your lecturer can help you with dictionary skills.

How to make good notes from your reading

- i. If you are taking notes on separate paper, **you must write down all the book/article details**. Nothing is more frustrating than finding a perfect quotation but being unable to use it because you don't know where it's from (except using it unreferenced and then being hauled up for plagiarism). Before you write anything else, write down: the author, the book/chapter/article /journal title, the editors if there are any, the date it was published, the place it was published if it's a book, and the page number/s as well as the name of the library if you borrowed it and the shelf-mark.
- ii. Many of the points given in the section about note-taking in lecture/seminars also apply when you are reading. In addition, before you start reading, you may want to try asking yourself: 'what do I expect to learn from this text?', and **make a list of a few questions** you have. These could be something like:
 - What are the three main points in this chapter?
 - What examples are used to illustrate the points?
 - Are this person's ideas new?
 - If so, in what way?
 - Are there any new words I need to learn?
 - In what ways is this article typical of when it was written?

As you can see, these are quite general questions you could ask of almost any article/chapter. If you read the article/ chapter looking for answers to these questions, you are **more likely to understand it, and to read it faster**. If you write down the answers to the questions, you will also have created **clear notes** which are **your own interpretation** of the article, not just a series of quotations. Looking for the answers to these questions will also **help you concentrate** and stay awake.

- iii. If the article/ can then save a lot of time by using different coloured pens/highlighter pens **to annotate the text as you read**. Mark the **key words**, the **main points**, any **good examples** or **quotations**, book **references** you want to check, or **ideas** and statements you disagree with.
- iv. **Underline, circle and highlight**. Use question marks, exclamation marks and lines in the margin. **Write comments to yourself in the margin** to remind you later of what you thought was good/bad/confusing about the article/chapter. If the book is your own, you can of course do this without taking a photocopy.
- v. Keep a selection of **post-its**, in different sizes and different colours. You can use these to mark a text as you read, and to write notes on. The great advantage of post-its is that you **can use them on library books**, but remember to remove them before you return the book.

Tip for painless recall of notes:

Re-read your notes ...

the next day

a week later

a month later

And you should find you know them with almost no effort.

SECTION 6: PRESENTATIONS

Why do tutors use oral presentations?

Oral presentations are the cause of a great deal of anxiety, so why do lecturers continue to require you to do them? There are quite a few good reasons...

- You learn more. Researching and presenting a subject usually results in better understanding and recall.
- Presentations given by members of your peer group can stimulate interesting discussions that aren't tutor-led. They provide a chance for you to develop your own thoughts and ideas.

- They give you the opportunity to practise giving presentations before you get into the 'world of work'. Many people have to make presentations to be awarded contracts, for example. You can give yourself a head start in the relatively safe environment of the classroom.
- It gives the class someone other than the tutor to listen to.
- Group work and presentations give you the chance to meet and work with other people, and enjoy the team effort of putting your ideas together.
- It is your chance to do something that interests you; if you're interested in the topic, your presentation will benefit!
- Unlike an exam, you can prepare more or less exactly and take all the materials in with you.

What makes a good oral presentation?

- It has to be **audible**. If the class can't hear you, they are not going to pay attention. Looking up and making eye contact with people at the back of the room will help you project your voice. Try to reduce the amount of unnecessary noise around you; for example, switch off the OHP when you don't need it.
- It has to be the **appropriate length**. Make sure you know how much time you actually have, and practise your talk beforehand against a clock. There is nothing worse than having to squash enough material for one hour into ten minutes. You don't necessarily have to talk non-stop; you can leave time for questions or discussion (people *will* ask questions if you make it interesting!). You may also be able to include a 'group activity' to do and then talk about.
- The content of your presentation needs to be **relevant** to the course and to your audience. Address your fellow students, not the tutor, and make sure the content is appropriate to their level of knowledge.
- **Talk to your audience** rather than reading your notes out. It will be far more interesting and far easier for them to follow.
- Your presentation should have a clear **structure**. Your audience will quickly get lost if you jump around and don't make the structure

explicit. Putting an OHP up or using PowerPoint with the outline of your talk will help your audience pick out your main points. It is helpful if you give 'sign posts' to the structure of your talk; for example you could start by saying 'first, I am going to talk through some definitions of — and then discuss the role of — within —' and later: 'so, I've spoken about —, now I'll go on to - ...'

- Aim for a presentation style that **holds the attention of your audience**. Use understandable, clear language, OHPs, slides, handouts, questions and discussion. Look at the audience, make eye contact, smile, don't fidget; ask the audience questions, or ask them to discuss a point.

- Your audience has something to look at apart from you; it is hard just to listen to someone talk. Use **clear handouts / OHPs / slides / flip charts / etc.** Provide handouts containing a summary of the presentation, follow-up reading, and any other crucial information. Make sure that your OHP slides are written / printed large enough, and that not too much information is squashed onto one OHP (5 lines is sometimes suggested as the maximum amount for an OHP). If you are using slides / a video / OHPs / PowerPoint make sure you know how to use the equipment before you start. A visit to the room before the class is a very good idea! You can also prepare flip charts beforehand.
- Think about your **pacing**. Check you know how much time you have to fill and have a fairly good idea how long your material will take to cover. If you are introducing a new idea to your audience, slow down a bit and be prepared to explain it again in another way if necessary. Know which bits you can cut short if any sections run on longer than you expect them to and you are running out of time.
- If you are presenting in a **group**, make sure everyone is clear about their tasks and what they do when; you don't want three people all doing the same thing. Think about who will stand and sit where (and practise arranging the necessary furniture in the room beforehand). Groups give you the opportunity to divide the topic into sections, with each person presenting a section. Be careful, however, that there is continuity and each part is relevant. Someone should give an introduction and a conclusion to hold the whole talk together.
- Grit your teeth and ask for **feedback** from the group and/or your tutor. It *will* help you improve for next time.

Checklist

Try answering the following questions to help you clarify what you are going to do. Add any questions that will help you:

- How long have I got?
- What do I need to include to cover the topic?
- Where can I find out information?
- Have I cut out everything which isn't relevant?
- Is the structure clear?
- What handouts / OHPs / slides do I need?
- When and how will I use them?
- What activities can the group take part in?
- Can I present from my notes without reading word for word?

— Have a run through and now think about the questions again.

Before the presentation

- Have I got the handouts / OHPs / slides / etc. in the right order?
- Have I got my notes to refer to?
- Do I have the chance to familiarise myself with the projectors / focus them?

During the presentation

- Take a deep breath
- Relax and smile!
- Don't hide behind the projector
- Don't read out the notes
- Talk to the back of the group, so your voice carries
- Look at your audience
- Don't rush through
- Give the opportunity to ask questions / clarify issues
- Be flexible; if your audience don't understand be prepared to rethink
- If someone throws in a question you are not entirely sure about, open it to group discussion.

This is the topic you have researched; relax and enjoy telling the rest of the group. If you are enthusiastic, it will come across.

After the presentation

Ask yourself these questions, and ask a friend/your tutor as well:

- *What were the strengths of my presentation?*
- *Did the handouts / OHPs / slides / etc. work well?*
- *Did the group participate in / enjoy the activities?*
- *Could I be heard? Did I hide? Did I make eye contact?*
- *What were the weaknesses?*
- *What could be improved for next time?*

SECTION 7: ESSAY WRITING

One of the most demanding exercises you will be working at is the writing of essays on topics set by course tutors. A good essay requires the following four stages:

- Initial Response
- Research
- Planning
- Writing

Initial Response:

- i. What is the title asking you to talk about (i.e. the text, novel, play, feature of language, social or political event, etc.)?
- ii. What aspect of this material is it asking you to address?
- iii. How does it want you to deal with it? (account for? evaluate? analyse? assess? compare? contrast? illustrate? discuss?).

Research:

- i. Return to the primary material (e.g. the text/film itself), re-reading it in the light of the issue(s) the essay will deal with. Make a note of any particular scenes, characters, lines of argument, quotations etc. which you think will be useful, and of the page number on which you found them.
- ii. Review secondary material, in the shape of critical books and articles: secondary material offers you different perspectives on the primary texts, and can help you identify key themes of the text, and broaden your background knowledge about a particular author, theory, or issue
- iii. Think about questions which have been generated by lectures and seminars
- iv. Reflect on how your essay relates to the intended learning outcomes of the course as a whole: look at the course specification, and also at the assessment criteria for essays.

Planning:

- i. Construct a series of logically related points plotted to take your argument from your Introduction to your Conclusion.
- ii. Assemble the evidence to support the points
- iii. Do *not* just create a list of **examples** illustrating the essay-title.
- iv. Do *not* include: background information, plot-summary or synopsis unless it is absolutely vital to the argument; your views on life in general, the nature of society and human relationships.
- v. **Your Introduction:** its function is to present your ideas in relation to the critical problem raised by the essay-title. You should **not** repeat the essay-title, or present background information just for the sake of it. You should not use the introduction to introduce the author or the text you are writing about (by giving a potted biography or publication history, for example). Note that this may be different from the way you have been taught to write essays at school, particularly if you went to school on the Continent.

- vi. **Your Conclusion** should try to reconfigure the critical problem in the light of your argument. Very often this might open out on to associated problems. You should **not** repeat the essay-title within the formula 'thus I agree/disagree with the question...', or rehearse your points in summary form, but it should be clear to the reader where you stand with relation to the question by the time the end of the essay is reached.

Writing:

- Think of your reader as someone who already knows the primary and secondary material and is interested in how *you* use it: therefore you do not need to explain the plot.
- i. Do **not** merely regurgitate lecture-notes: direct your response to the specific question you have been asked to discuss.
 - ii. Use reference to the text as **evidence** to support the point you are making, and only quote when it is the original formulation that actually makes your point.

- iii. **Quotation** should not be used *instead of* making points; it must always be directed towards the argument. If you use a quotation make it clear *why* you are quoting that particular passage, and how it fits into your argument. Remember that if you are quoting from a foreign text, you must quote in the original language (except on ELCS courses).
- iv. When you refer to secondary reading in your essay, use it to position your own argument, for example: 'Whereas Smith argues that romance novels are fundamentally conservative in their presentation of women, in *Pot-Bouille* we find an example of a romance narrative used to critique conventional gender roles'; 'Jones suggests that Duras uses the colour red as a symbol of passion, and we can see evidence of this in the repeated references to red wine and to the red sun in her novel.'
- v. Whenever you quote from or refer to any text, primary or secondary, you must give the reference in a footnote or endnote, including the page number (see below). It is not enough merely to include the item in the bibliography; if you don't identify the source of material **at the point where you use it**, you are still guilty of plagiarism.
- vi. Use an appropriate formal register and vocabulary; avoid colloquial expressions.
- vii. Use the **present tense**. Thus, for example, 'Emma Bovary is a prisoner of her circumstances', (not was).
- viii. Titles of books and films should be italicised e.g. *L'Education sentimentale*, *Matador*. [If you are hand-writing, in an exam, for instance, use underlining instead of *italics*] Titles of poems and short stories, or of paintings, photographs, etc. should be placed in single inverted commas, e.g. 'A un olmo seco', 'La Trahison des images'.
- ix. You **must** include a bibliography of works *cited* or referred to.
- x. Essays should normally be typed/word-processed in a font no smaller than 12-point and with generous margins.

Unless you have explicit permission to do otherwise, you should assume that all essays must be written in English. The quality of your English matters because it is the vehicle for expressing your ideas, so a poor command of the language is bound to have a detrimental effect on the marks you will be able to achieve. The following points are designed to highlight areas which many students overlook:

- A spell-check facility on a computer is helpful in many ways but cannot be relied upon entirely, as it will only pick up words it does not recognize and will not be able to judge if the word you have typed is the one you mean. For example, it will not correct *baron* (the title of nobility) if you actually mean *barren* (unable to bear children). That means you must still use a dictionary if you are unsure of a spelling.
- Beware of the auto-check facility when you are quoting in a foreign language, as the software sometimes 'corrects' – changes into English – a word which you have typed correctly in another

language. For example, it is likely to alter *novela*, Spanish for 'novel' to *novella*, the English word for a short narrative tale. This is something worth checking particularly carefully before you submit a piece of work.

- Beware of American spellings: some software will highlight as wrong an English spelling of a word and leave unmarked an American spelling which is wrong in England.
- The language best suited to essay-writing is relatively formal English. This need not be pretentious or long-winded, but should avoid colloquialisms, slang, and abbreviations common in informal usage (including e-mail and text messages). Examples of inappropriate English for essays are terms like *mum* and *dad* for *mother* and *father*, the contracted forms (*can't*, *don't...*), abbreviations such as *etc.*, *e.g.*, or *i.e.*
- Punctuation and sentence structure matter, as these contribute to the comprehensibility of what you write. Paragraph divisions are particularly useful, for example, since they signal to the reader that you are moving on to a new point.
- Carelessness will be penalised. Examples of what would be considered unacceptable are spelling the name of an author or character wrongly, mis-quoting from a text, calling a novel a play, or submitting an essay which still contains numerous typing errors.
- Be sure to proofread your work on paper, not on your computer screen. Most people miss mistakes on screen that they would catch on a printed copy.
- If you need help to improve your writing skills in English, please make an appointment for a one to one session with your Academic Skills tutor (if you are a native speaker of English) or RHI (if you need help with English as a foreign language).

DISSERTATIONS & LINK ESSAYS

In preparing dissertations or Link Essays, you will use many of the skills developed in essay-writing. You will receive detailed advice from your tutor, both in general and in relation to the specific topic on which you are working, but you should also pay particular attention to:

- The importance of getting approval for a title which allows you to focus on critical problems rather than provide a survey.
- The importance of bringing a conceptual model to bear on material.
- Sectioning ('chapters' or sub-headings) reflecting an intellectual structure.
- Presentation.
- The Word-Limit.
- Originality: you must include a statement certifying that, with the exception of works cited, the writing is your own.

Essay Writing Checklist

ARE YOU SATISFIED THAT YOUR ESSAY

1. has an overall structure which

- a) answers the question
- b) has a clear introduction and main body which has an argument running through
- c) presents relevant information

2. has a conclusion which

- a) is relevant
- b) summarises the argument
- c) follows logically from the argument
- d) shows the implications of the argument

3. at paragraph level

- a) makes claims relevant to the question
- b) makes claims which are central to the overall argument
- c) presents information as part of evidence
- d) critically evaluates evidence
- e) questions and explores key aspects of the subject

4. signposts the sequence of the argument by

- a) highlighting the main points by use of language
- b) being concise
- c) reminding readers (i) what your overall argument is (ii) what the argument is at different points in your essay (iii) where your argument is going

- 5. gives full references** for all materials referred to, or used in preparation of the essay (see below)

REFERENCING AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES

If you incorporate the work of other people into your essay and present it as if it were your own work, even unintentionally, this is known as plagiarism. Plagiarism is not acceptable practice on any academic programme at the college; it is easily detectable and severely punished. Therefore any use you make in your work of other people's work (writing, graphics, thought, ideas) should be duly acknowledged in references, whether you are using direct quotation, or summarising another person's work. The following guidelines will help you to give references in an appropriate format.

Footnotes and endnotes

Footnotes (at the bottom of each page) or endnotes (at the end of the essay or dissertation) should be used for referencing quotations. They should be presented as follows:

Printed books: Author, *title*, editor's name (where appropriate, and preceded by 'ed.'), (place: publisher, date of publication) volume and/or page numbers.

e.g. T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 45.

Articles in books: Author of article, 'Title of article' in editor's name (ed.), *Title of book* (place: publisher, date of publication), page numbers
e.g. M. Tetel, 'The Rhetoric of Lyricism in the *Heptameron*' in John D. Lyons (ed.), *Critical Tales* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 51.

Periodical articles: Author, 'title of article', *title of periodical*, volume number (date of publication) page number(s).
e.g. Stephen Heath, 'Family Plots', *Comparative Criticism*, 23 (1983): 318-22.

Films: *Title of film*, director, distributor (date) e.g. *Macbeth*, dir. Orson Welles, Republic pictures, 1948.

Websites: Author, (date). *title of article*. URL (Date accessed) -
e.g. Churchyard, H., (2006). *Sex in Pride and Prejudice*.
<http://curly.cc.utexas.edu/~churchh/pptopics.html#sex>. (Accessed 30 June 2006).

N.B. If you refer to an item for a second time, you do not need to repeat all the information but would instead give an abbreviated form:
Clark, *Image of the People*, pp. 24-26 (pp. is used when you are referring to more than one page).

Bibliography

Your bibliography should give details for all materials that you have used in your research. These examples show: a book, an edited collection of essays, the collected works of an author, a journal article, a film, a website.

Clark, T. J., *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973)

Atack, Margaret, and Phil Powrie, eds, *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990)

Barthes, Roland, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1994)

Heath, Stephen, 'Family Plots', *Comparative Criticism*, (1983): 318-22

Limosin, Jean-Pierre, *Tokyo Eyes*, Lumen Films-Eurospace (1998)

Nimier, Marie, 'Entretien avec Marie Nimier' (2000)

http://www.fnac.net/le_goncourt_des_lyceens_2000/auteurs/m_nimier_5.asp (30/10/2000)

TURNITIN

You are to submit both an electronic and a printed copy of your assignments. The steps you have to take in order to submit the electronic copy are described in detail below. It is sent to the Joint Information

Services Committee (JISC) Plagiarism Detection Site (PDS) for comparison with the contents of that system's databank.

Your work is returned to the markers at Royal Holloway annotated to show matching text and its source(s). This step helps not only to detect plagiarism, but to aid the markers in checking that you are referencing quoted material appropriately.

Proper citation of sources is a vital aspect of reporting scientific work, so it is important that you get practice in doing it correctly right from the start of your degree course. Note that what is being said here is *not* that you should never quote material from others; it is that when you do so you *must* acknowledge it appropriately.

The electronic and printed versions of your assignment must *both* be submitted by the deadline to avoid penalty for lateness.

Assessments are only complete when both an electronic and a paper version have been submitted.

You may wish to take the college's Moodle Course 'Avoiding Plagiarism' - see <http://moodle.rhul.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=1586> - which can be accessed using your RHUL username and password. This resource contains:

- Info about Turnitin.
- A multimedia 'Avoiding Plagiarism' course.
- **A student manual to finding, registering with and submitting to Turnitin** (which you use with the Class IDs and Password for each course).

SECTION 8: COMMENTARIES

Commentaries test your ability to engage closely with the *detail* of a given text, paying attention to the language used and the style of the writing, and relating this, where appropriate, to what you know about the wider themes and ideas of the text from which the extract has been taken.

In a commentary exercise you will be presented with a short text, usually taken from a book which you have been studying.

Although your knowledge of the text will help you to understand the extract, your commentary should focus mainly on the extract in front of you.

The instructions will typically ask you to focus in particular on two or three different points, such as, for example, the presentation of a particular character, the type of imagery used by the author, the rhyme scheme of a poem etc.

The following steps will help ensure that you produce a clearly-focused commentary. Remember also to look at the assessment criteria in your Handbook:

i. **Read the extract.** Can you identify where it comes from in the text? Why do you think this particular extract has been chosen as the basis for your commentary? Why is it interesting?

ii. **Re-Read the instructions:** What points do they ask you to focus on in particular?

iii. **Re-read the extract:** highlight any aspects which you think are relevant to the points you are going to focus on. You might need to consider some or all of the following:

- use of rhyme, metre, and alliteration;
- lexical choices which mean that particular words are given prominence or carry special significance;
- syntax, especially when this is manipulated to highlight meaning, to create ambiguity, or to interact with poetic verse form;
- grammatical features such as sequences of verb tenses which might be used to create a particular temporal structure.
- voice, perspective, and point of view: who is speaking/narrating? Who is their intended audience?
- assumptions that are implicitly or explicitly made by the text or attributed to the reader.
- ways in which configurations of imagery and thematic developments are set up and manipulated.

iv. **Think** about how these words, images or structures you have identified affect your response to the text, to the characters etc. There is no point in simply describing such features if you do not also explain how or why they are important or meaningful. You must

demonstrate how, and suggest why, the author uses language, action and imagery etc. to create a certain effect.

v. **Plan:** you need to organise your points into a logical structure: rather than going through the extract line by line from beginning to end, you can use the points raised in the question to provide a basic structure for your commentary.

vi. **Write:**

- Start by saying where the extract comes from: what stage of the plot, or argument, does it represent?
- Go through each of the points raised in the question.
- Identifying the relevant parts of the extract, explain what effect the words, images, or lines you have highlighted have upon the overall effect of the extract, and of the text as a whole.

- Rather than quoting large chunks of the extract, you can use line numbers to refer to specific features, for example 'In line 9, Zola uses the image of a giant mouth to describe the mine: this dramatic image suggests that the workers will be consumed in the mine, and contributes towards the menacing atmosphere of the extract.'

- Conclude by summing up the main points you have made about the extract, and relating these to the text as a whole.

SECTION 9: EXAMINATIONS

How do you feel about preparing for exams?

Read the statements below and decide which ones, if any, apply to you. If you wish to add a comment about any item, or you feel any aspects have been omitted, please add them at the end.

- I find it difficult to begin revision while we are still doing new stuff.
- I sleep badly the night before an exam.
- I'm always certain I'm going to fail exams.
- I can't draw up a realistic timetable.
- I can't concentrate on my revision for long enough at a time.
- I forget things so easily.
- Other people feel so confident.
- I can't get down to revision until the last moment.
- I don't think I work hard enough.
- Sometimes I feel like giving up.

Recognising how you feel is a big step towards being able to improve things. If you compare your answers with a friend's, you may also find that worries you thought were yours alone are actually quite commonly experienced. The following sections are designed to help you manage your fears about exams, and to do your best.

What do exams require of you?

To do well in exams, you need to:

- **Organise your knowledge for revision**

You need to allow time to sort through your notes. Check areas you are less sure of in the library and with friends. Get an overview of your subject by reading the appropriate sections of reference books, which can provide summaries of large areas of knowledge.

- **Recall what you have learnt**

You need to be able to memorise the information well enough to be able to recall it under exam conditions.

- **Restructure your knowledge in response to a particular question**

An important aspect of preparing for exams is knowing what the examiners require from you. Many students can recall the necessary information, but don't spend enough time shaping it into the form asked for by the exam question.

For that last point, it's important to start by knowing the format of your exam. Can you answer the following questions?

- how long are your exams?
 - how many questions do you need to answer?
 - what format will they be in (essay, short answer, multiple choice)?
 - will the exams follow the same format as in previous years?
- can you get copies of previous exam papers to work from?

If you are unsure of any of the answers, ask the course **tutor /coordinator**. Being sure of these facts will help to eliminate any unnecessary worry and set you a framework for your revision.

Planning your revision

1. **Make a timetable early on** - perhaps 6 to 8 weeks ahead, including other unavoidable academic/work/family commitments, time for relaxation, exercise, social events, exam dates and times, and the times you can set aside for revision and library visits. It's worth doing this well before your exam, because you will probably find that by the time you have included your course work and other commitments, you have far less time than you thought. It's much better to find this out while there's still enough time to do something about it than find out a month beforehand when there's little you can do.
2. **Prioritise your topics**. You may wish to allocate more time to your weaker areas; decide whether you prefer to spend a complete unit of time on one area, or whether you will change between areas at, for example, hourly intervals.
3. **Exam alert!** It's a good idea to explain to those around you how important the exams are to you, and persuade them to help wherever

possible. You can promise to repay the favour when the exams are over!

Approaching your revision

Look through the materials you were given at the beginning of the course that list the **topics** covered and the **learning outcomes** for the course. Decide **how many topic areas** you will need to revise. **Gather together all your relevant notes /reading etc.**

Predicting questions

Ask your tutor the best way to prepare for the exam. They may be able to give you sample questions similar to those set in the exam, or guide you to past papers.

- When you have decided which areas you will be revising, **make plans** of what you would include in an answer on that topic - either as a mind map, in spider diagram format, in a linear plan, or whatever method you prefer. If you want more practice at writing full answers, you can write practice essays. Remember if you do this that most people cannot write at a speed of more **than 4 pages an hour** (more if your handwriting is very large, less if it's very small, obviously). If you are allowing 45 minutes per essay, therefore, you will probably be writing three page answers. Take this into account when you are planning exam answers, and try and include all your most important ideas in three pages.

Organising group revision sessions

Without question, one of the best ways to revise is with other people. The advantages include:

- **Company**, to make the process of revision seem more worthwhile and interesting, and to reassure you that you are not the only person who feels the way you do.
- **Deadlines**, to help you work to schedule; if you have agreed to meet up to discuss a topic, you are more likely to complete your work on time.
- **Discussion, to help you understand ideas**, and to explore them in a way which makes them more individual to you.
- **Discussion, to help you remember ideas**, since people often recall conversations better than what they read.
- **Other people's time**; you can divide the workload, so that you take it in turns to brief the others on specific areas. This can help you **cover more ground more quickly**.
- **Other people's brains**; when you get stuck on something, there **is more chance that you will work it out** if there is more than one of you.
- **Less chance of missing out a crucial bit**. Sometimes, if there's an area we don't understand very well, we may not even realise it. Talking the subject over with other students will help you **identify these gaps**, and sometimes your fellow students can explain something in a way that's easier to understand than your lecturer's.

As you can see, there's a lot to be said for group revision, **so it's worth contacting other people on your course and agreeing to meet up.** This can be as often or infrequently as you like. You can even do it by phone, fax, e-mail or letter! Even if you think there's no one on the course you know well enough to ask, give it a go because you may be pleasantly surprised by the results.

Using your time effectively

Part of using your revision time effectively involves recognising your **own preferred times of working, and the ways you work best.** For example, you need to know the answers to the questions about your working habits already asked in the time management section. Go to that section now if you haven't already worked through it.

Remember to provide yourself with **a goal or a target** at each revision session and **work towards it. Tackle one task at a time. Then move on.** This will stop you from becoming stale and help you to stay focused and alert.

Memory aids

Your memory works in two ways. You have a **long-term memory** where ideas and memories from years before are stored, and a **short-term memory**, where recent information is stored. In your long term memory, you will expect to store **most of the information** about your subjects.

In your short term memory, you will probably store **formulae and quotations** - the kind of information you would normally be able to look up. There are all sorts of things you can do to improve your memory.

- Memory works better, the more **'hooks'** you have to help you recall the information. 'Hooks' are things you can associate with the information to help you remember it. For example, try to make links between ideas and other ways of representing them other than writing - drawing cartoons, or talking through your ideas to a friend will help the ideas to 'stick' in your head. Colours and diagrams work well. A change of surroundings help sometimes, so try working in different places occasionally - a cafe, in the kitchen, or in the bath, for example!
- However complicated your notes appear to be, try **to reduce all the important points** on a topic to a single summary sheet. The **process** of summarising will help fix the ideas in your mind, and one sheet is much easier to revise from and memorise than a sheaf of notes.
- After making your one-page summaries, use **index cards to show topic headings and key points / dates.** You can use the backs of your cards for quotations / formulae you need to remember, and carry them around with you to read (e.g. on the bus).
- Use **post-it notes** for bullet points, key phrases, and important dates. Stick them on your mirror, by the kettle - wherever you can see them to jog your memory. Some people associate different topics with

different rooms (e.g. 'Expressionism' post-its in the bathroom, 'Stage and Screen' post-its in the kitchen) and trigger their recall of the information by visualising where they placed their post-its around each room.

- **Mnemonics** - if you have a list of points to remember, try taking the first letter of each word and making another word, or put them in a sequence you can recall.

Active vs. passive revision

It's important that you make your revision as **active** as possible, and don't allow it to become **passive**. Many people come unstuck in exams because they haven't realised that there is a difference between **recognising** the material in their notes, which can be achieved by passively reading through them a few times, and being able to **recall** that information in an exam, which can only be achieved by active revision methods.

In order to be sure that you can actually recall what you need to know in your exam, you need to practise using the information. You can do this by summarising it, making maps or charts showing the key points, by quizzing yourself, getting friends to ask you questions on it, or by setting yourself mock exam questions. You might, for example, follow these stages:

1. Make sure your notes are complete. If they aren't you'll need to visit the library or complete them from your own books.
2. Reread your complete set of notes and begin to summarise them, checking you understand the relationships between the ideas as you go.
3. Many people find the best way to summarise their notes is in diagram form - as a bubble map or a tree diagram. This will allow you to show the links between the main ideas and to include examples and illustrations.
4. From your summary, produce a single summary sheet which outlines everything you will need to learn on that topic for the exam. You will be able to keep referring to this and checking you understand the relationships between the different areas.
5. Make yourself a checklist of key questions, which you can ask yourself, or get someone else to ask you. Aim to be able to answer all your own key questions.

It doesn't really matter whether you revise in this order, or even whether you use these particular techniques. The important thing is to 'do things' with your notes, other than just reading them.

Managing exam stress

Many people find the anxiety they feel about forthcoming exams is one of the main obstacles to them performing well. For this reason, it is very important to keep your stress levels down.

- One of the best ways to do this is to **prepare well for the exam**, so you feel confident. However, sometimes it is impossible to prepare as well as you would like, and if it is an important exam, however well you prepared, you will still probably feel nervous.
 - Anything that makes you laugh will help you **relax** - you could get something funny out on video or go to the cinema.
 - Try to have a **routine** worked out for the night before and the day of your exam - what you will wear, how long it will take you to get to the place of your exam, and if you are driving, where you will park. These are things which can worry you otherwise, making you more tense, and having a plan will help you stay calm. Get everything ready and set out before you go to bed the night before an exam (student ID card, pens, travelcard, keys...). Then you won't lie in bed thinking 'I mustn't forget my student card' or 'Where did I put my travelcard?' and it will make for a calmer experience when the day of the exam dawns.
 - If you find you are continually thinking negative thoughts, for example, 'I can't do this', 'I should never have started this course', 'now everyone will find out how little I really know', 'This was my one chance, and I'm going to blow it', these in themselves can be very destructive and interfere with your performance.
-
- To block them, make a list of **positive thoughts**, for example, 'I was good enough to start it so I'm good enough to finish it', 'I can do anything if I try hard enough', 'I'm intelligent, organised, committed, and I can do it'. Repeat them to yourself when the negative thoughts start. It may seem a very artificial exercise, but it really can help.
 - Don't forget to try to **eat reasonably well**. Relatively small amounts more often will help keep your blood sugar levels on an even keel. If nerves make you feel sick, eat light, bland food only beforehand (not a hot curry the night before or a big fry-up for breakfast!) If you eat fewer, larger meals, you are more likely to want to go to sleep immediately after eating. Vitamin pills can help your general health; Vitamin B complex in particular is good for your nervous system. Eating fruit and vegetables boosts your immune system and helps you avoid getting run-down and ill. Try to keep your consumption of alcohol fairly low. You don't sleep so well after drinking, and therefore you won't be able to work so well the next day.
 - **Exercise** helps keep you healthy, increases your stamina and helps you get rid of stresses and worries. Some people go for walks, others cycle, run, go to aerobics or for a swim. You could also try yoga, or tai chi, or any other exercise which concentrates on relaxation and breathing.
 - If stress is a great source of anxiety to you, **find out about counselling, stress management classes and hypnotherapy to help you handle your exams**.

Exam techniques

The secret of doing well in exams is being prepared. This doesn't just mean having done your revision, it also means being prepared for the experience of doing an exam.

1. Visualisation

Visualisation is a very valuable technique used a lot in sport to help people improve their performance. It's a way of **mentally preparing yourself for what you will need to do** before the event - in this case an exam. It has been proved that the process of visualising an action beforehand can improve your performance more than actually practising it.

Here's an example from a sports event. A runner might visualise herself on the morning before a race: waking up, having a particular breakfast, what she'll be wearing, her journey to the stadium, who she will talk to — and then walking out into the stadium, the noise of the crowd, the heat, the crunch of the track under her shoes. She'll think about how she'll feel — a bit nervous — her stomach will be jittery, the adrenaline will be making all her limbs a bit twitchy. She'll do her warm-up exercises, check her hair is tied back, nod to her coach, take her position on the block, think about regulating her breathing, finding her balance, feeling the power in her legs, and mentally focusing on the gun shot that will start the

race. She'll have already rehearsed her race plan — so, if the others pull away first, she won't be fazed, because she knows she's stronger in the second half of the race. As they start to 'die', she will push through to win.

This is what you need to do in preparation for your exam as well. You need to be prepared for the journey through heavy traffic, finding a parking space, the clusters of nervous people outside the exam hall, the anxiety of finding the right desk, your fear that you have forgotten EVERYTHING you ever knew about the subject.

If you have mentally rehearsed these stages, you will recognise them as a natural part of the process and be able to carry on calmly, regardless.

It is also possible to use the visualisation process to foresee difficulties which might arise on the day, and which, by visualising them beforehand, you will be able to take avoiding action. For example, it may be very hot or very cold in the exam hall - you might want to dress in lots of layers which you can put on or take off as necessary. Take water in with you. Make sure you know how you will get to the exam hall, how long the journey will take at that time, on that day of the week, and so on.

Exams at Royal Holloway are often held in rooms that you do not have any reason to go to at other times of the year. If you see an exam is in an unfamiliar building or room, go and check beforehand so you know your way there.

2. Your game plan

You will need a **'game plan'**, such as managers give footballers before a match. This will include deciding how long you will spend reading the paper, choosing your questions, and planning your answers. You need to allow **an appropriate amount of time to each section** of the paper, in proportion to the marks available for that answer. You also need to allocate enough time at the end **to check your paper** - are the questions all clearly numbered? Have you missed out an important sentence?

If you work out your 'game plan' in advance, you will have the confidence to stick to it, and ignore the people who start writing straight away, who normally make you feel panic stricken. Remember that they may have completely misinterpreted the question they are writing away so confidently about. **The time you spend planning your answers is time well-spent.**

3. Planning your answers

After you have listened for any additional instructions from the invigilators, and read the instructions on the exam paper, **take your time over reading the questions**. Identify the questions you think you will answer. If you can't decide completely, start with

one you feel sure you want to tackle, and decide amongst the others when the time comes.

- Before you start writing, **make a plan**. This will:
 - Help you to design your answer to fit the question.*
 - Help you to cover all the necessary areas required by the question.*
 - Give you the opportunity to note down dates or quotations you need to remember for inclusion later in your essay.*
 - Help you to complete the essay in the allocated time.*

When you look at your plan, you can **divide the areas you need to cover by the time you have available**. For example, if the question asks about the advantages and disadvantages of Theory X, you can decide to spend 5 minutes on your introduction, 10 minutes on the advantages, 10 minutes on the disadvantages, 5 minutes on the conclusion, and 5 minutes reading over and checking your answer.

- **Structure your answer** according to the **exact wording** of the question, paying particular attention to key words in the question such as 'describe', 'assess', or 'compare'. **Do not be tempted to write down everything you know about a topic** regardless of the question; the examiner will just disregard it, and you will have wasted valuable time.
- **If you run out of time on a question, go onto the next question.** There are more marks to be earned in the first part of the next answer than in the final part of the previous answer. For this reason, **always answer ALL the questions that you are required to answer.**

- If you do have to leave a question unfinished, **try to allow enough time to come back to it** by trimming minutes here and there. You will often find that your subconscious will have come up with a good conclusion for you while you were busy with another question!
- Remember to take a watch or a small clock with you - preferably one without an audible 'tick', which might distract you or those around you.
- You don't need to stick exactly to your time plan, but if you have decided beforehand that it is a good plan, then you will probably do better if you stick quite closely to it. The important thing is for you to think through **what suits you to do or not to do** immediately before and during an exam. Develop your own strategies based on your individual preference.

A TIME PLAN

Here's an example of a time plan which someone might follow in their exam:

Exam length: 2 hours number of essays to write: 2

Exam starts at 9.30 am

Time to read the paper & choose 2 questions:	6 mins.	9.36
Planning answer 1:	4 mins.	9.40
Planning answer 2:	4 mins.	9.44
Writing answer 1:	50 mins.	10.34
Writing answer 2:	50 mins.	11.24
Time to reread your answers:	6 mins.	11.30

Understanding exam questions

Many people lose marks in exams by misinterpreting the questions. To help you avoid this:

- Take **highlighter pens** or ordinary pens of **different colours** into the exam.
- **Highlight or underline the key words** of the question as it is printed on your exam paper (practise this on photocopied past papers).
- In one colour, mark all the key **'instruction words'** such as 'evaluate', 'discuss', 'compare and contrast', or 'describe'. Also mark any references to how many of anything you are supposed to do, for example, 'refer to no more than **three** case studies'. You should also mark words like 'and' and 'or', which tell you whether you need to look at only one thing out of a choice. In another colour, mark key words relating to the content of what you have to

do, to make sure you miss nothing important in the title. **IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION BEFORE YOU START TO PLAN AND WRITE YOUR ESSAY.**

Exam Checklist

(add anything personal to you at the end)

- Do you know the days and dates of your exams?
- Do you know what time they are and how long each one lasts?
- Where is each exam being held?
- Have you any clashes that need sorting out?
- How will you get to each exam?
- Have you got comfortable clothes to wear that will be warm enough / cool enough whatever the temperature in the hall?
- Have you got a bottle of water?
- Have you got ordinary pens (including spares), different coloured pens and a highlighter pen, pencils, a sharpener and an eraser?
- Have you got any specialist equipment you need?
- Have you got a game plan of how long you will spend reading the paper, answering each question, and checking your answers?
- Have you visualised yourself taking your first look at the exam paper, and calming yourself down as you look for the questions you will answer? Have you seen yourself selecting a question and annotating it with a highlighter pen and different colours, to make sure you have read and understood every word? Can you

see yourself pausing, breathing deeply and calmly starting your plan?

- _____
- _____

APPENDIX I: Weekly plan - Identifying Your Study Time

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
1.00							
2.00							
3.00							
4.00							
5.00							
6.00							
7.00							
8.00							
9.00							
10.00							
11.00							
12.00							
13.00							
14.00							
15.00							
16.00							

17.00							
18.00							
19.00							
20.00							
21.00							
22.00							
23.00							
24.00							

Fill in the timetable and include all activities; sleep, work, study, lectures, seminars, sport, shopping etc. Are you happy with this or would you like it to be different?

APPENDIX II: Covey's Quadrant

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	I <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crises • Pressing problems • Assignment deadlines • Preparations • Lectures, seminars etc 	II <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation • Prevention • Clarifying values • Planning • Relationship building • Creating
NOT IMPORTANT	III <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interruptions, e.g. phone calls, some emails • Some meetings • Some pressing matters • Many popular activities 	IV <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trivia, busywork • Junk mail • Some phone calls • Time wasters • 'escape' activities

Stephen Covey – 7 habits of Highly Effective People

Quadrant I is where we need to 'manage our time' to keep on top of tasks, actually produce and meet the challenges set. Too much time spent procrastinating here and there will be serious consequences. This is where we can easily feel 'stressed out'.

Quadrant II is where we deal with important issues such as planning (to keep quadrant I in check), creating new ideas and working towards our goals for both university and life outside. Keeping fit, doing exercise, broadening our

mind, making intellectual leaps in our studies, charity work, reading, helping friends and family, and developing meaningful relationships are all part of quadrant II. In this quadrant we feel empowered. We need to spend a good deal of our time here for our own fulfillment.

Quadrant III is where we operate on an urgency basis, with things that are not important for us. You may find you are reacting to other people's priorities at the expense of your – try and keep a balance.

Quadrant IV is where we generally waste our time. We might slump in front of the television, read trashy novels etc. We are all in this quadrant from time to time, but try to limit how much time you spend here. Very often when you procrastinate you will find yourself in this quadrant.

Activity

Looking back at your weekly plan, can you place the activities in each quadrant? Are any of your activities in QI really QIII? You can gain time by weeding out QIII activities. How developed is quadrant II for you? This is where your life's goals are, where you create and reflect on activities. You regenerate yourself here.

APPENDIX III Part A:

Academic and study skills assessment planner

Column A: Tick if the statement is generally true of you

Column B: Rate how important it is to you 6 = unimportant 10 = essential

Column C: Rate how good you are at this skill now 1 = very weak 5 = excellent

Column D: Subtract the score in column C from Column B

The highest scores in D are likely to be priorities

APPENDIX III Part B: Academic and study skills

Skills statements	A This is true (✓)	B Skill needed? (scale 6-10)	C Current ability? (scale 1-5)	D Priority (B minus C)
I am aware of how I learn best and how to reflect upon and evaluate my work				
I am well motivated and know how to set myself manageable goals				
I have good time and space management skills and am able to organise my workload				
I have strategies for getting going with a new task or assignment				
I am confident of my research skills				
I am aware of which strategies suit me best for reading under different conditions				
I am able to make, organise, store find and use my notes effectively				
I am able to use lecture time effectively and get the best out of lectures				
I know how to make the most of group work and seminars				
I am able to manage a range of writing tasks appropriately				
I know how to use IT to help in academic study				
I am able to think critically and evaluate my own and other's Arguments				
I have good memory strategies				
I have good revision strategies and exam techniques				

priorities

Column A: Using the score from part 1 decide whether each item is really a priority, whether it could wait, who else could do it or any other options you have.

Column B: Number your priorities in order. Highlight in yellow the one you are going to work on next. Highlight in red after you have worked on it

Column C: Where to seek further information to help develop your skills

Skill	A Priority 'can wait' or other options	B Your priorities	C Further information
I am going to find out how I learn best, and how to reflect upon/evaluate my work			Lecture/Moodle week 1 Personal development planning http://www.rhul.ac.uk/pdp/
I am going to be better motivated and learn to set myself manageable goals			Moodle Race, P., <i>500 Tips for students</i> , (Oxford: Blackwell,2003) pp.78-80.
I am going to develop strategies for getting started on a new task or assignment			Lecture/Moodle week 5 Race, P., <i>500 Tips for students</i> , (Oxford: Blackwell,2003) pp.24-26
I am going to improve my organisational and time management skills			Lecture/Moodle week 2 Cottrell, Study Skills Handbook
I am going to improve my research skills			Check Library and information training sessions [Online]/ Turabian, K., <i>A Manual for writers of research papers, theses and dissertations</i>
I am going to develop my reading skills			Lecture/Moodle week 4
I am going to improve my note making and organise and use my notes effectively			Lecture/Moodle week 3
I am going to use lecture time effectively to get the best out of lectures			Lecture/Moodle week 1
I am going to make more use of working with others (group work, seminars, etc)			Race, P., <i>500 Tips for students</i> , (Oxford: Blackwell,2003), pp.36-38.
I am going to develop my writing skills			Lecture/Module weeks 5-10 Williams, Joseph, M., <i>Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace</i>
I am going to make more use of IT to help my academic study			Check IT sessions on Computer centre training pages [Online]
I am going to develop my critical and analytical thinking skills			Cottrell, S., <i>Critical Thinking Skills: Developing effective analysis and argument</i> . (Basingstoke: Macmillan Palgrave, 2005)
I am going to improve my memory strategies			Buzan, T. <i>The Buzan Study Skills Handbook</i>
I am going to develop good revision strategies and exam techniques			Cottrell, S., <i>The Exam Skills Handbook</i> , (Basingstoke: Macmillan Palgrave, 2007)

APPENDIX III Part C: Academic and Study skills: Action Plan

- Review your current strengths, areas you wish to develop and priorities.
- Repeat the whole exercise at the end of term and compare your progress

Date:
Summary of my current strengths, skills and qualities: What I have achieved so far
Summary of what I need to work on, develop or improve
My priorities: What am I going to do, when and how?
How will I know that I have improved? (E.g. What changes would I expect in my work, I myself, or in the attitude of others?)

Adapted from Cottrell, S. *The Study Skills Handbook*, (Palgrave Macmillan: 2001)