

Essential Study Skills

The Complete Guide to
Success at University

Tom Burns & Sandra Sinfield

4th Edition

companion
website



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1 Introduction

Coming to university can feel great – you're excited – you're joining a whole new group of people and a whole new way of life ... But you also feel apprehensive, under-prepared and nervous – we're here to help with that.

'This book really sets students up to succeed!'

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Introduction and welcome

Welcome to *Essential Study Skills: The Complete Guide to Success at University* (ESS4). This book is designed to help you become a more effective and happier student by uncovering some of the mysteries of university life and revealing the 'what, why and how' of learning, studying and succeeding at university as quickly as possible. We also suggest that university is more than studying – and to get the most from university we suggest that you embrace all that your university offers you – different people, new friends, clubs and societies.

Both of us, the authors, were the first in our immediate families to go to university and whilst we found aspects of university life strange, difficult or alienating, we managed to really enjoy ourselves, both as students, and by getting involved in the students' union (SU), by going to the film club, by hanging out in the canteen and chatting to people, by watching bands and by writing for the student newsletter. Because of all of this we learned more, grew more and enjoyed our studies as well.

Life at university is more fraught now than when we were students: there are loans to take out, enormous fees to take on board, you're worried about the cost to yourself and your family – and the job market is unpredictable: you may just want to study hard – never lifting your head out of your books. In these troubled times, this book is designed to help you understand how to succeed at university; but we are going to suggest ways of enjoying university as well. We look at all the different things you will be expected to do as a student – from independent learning to

group work, from essays and reports to presentations and seminars, from dealing with your hopes and fears to being successful in creative, analytical and critical thinking – with tips and strategies for how to do them well. We also look at how to make university a positive experience that can change your life in wonderful ways.

It may take some time to work through the book – but you will be a happier and much more successful student if you invest a little time learning how to make the most of university.

Style warning

We have tried to be user-friendly, speaking directly to you without over-simplifying or, worse, being patronising. But this is difficult. There is no one writing style or way of explaining university life that will work for everybody, we hope it works for you.

Book warning

Becoming a successful student is a little like learning to drive. You would not expect to just read a book on driving and leap into a car ready to whizz up the motorway. You would expect to have many, many driving lessons; you would practise and practise to get it right. Hopefully you would see your driving instructor as a critical friend, there to give you advice – and guide you towards being a better driver ... We hope that that is the role of this book for you. We do pass on successful techniques and suggestions; but they have to be put into practice – again and again. This is not a quick fix. We cover techniques that will need practising and refining to work for you. We also suggest ways of getting involved in university – from becoming a peer mentor to joining the gym or getting involved in the social side of university life – that may feel like distractions that will get in the way of your studies – but these are important too and we heartily recommend that you make time for these as well.

Out of your comfort zone

It is hard to change, but being a student requires that we do change – otherwise why bother going to university in the first place? Embrace change as a positive. Be prepared to get involved with university – to make new friends and do new things. Be prepared to shed unsuccessful study strategies – and to put the time and effort into developing new, perhaps uncomfortable ones. Reflect on and critique your own practice – and, when at university, try to take feedback from tutors as good advice designed to help – not to put you down. Be prepared to make mistakes and learn from them.

As human beings we learn by trial and error, by having a go, getting it wrong – then having more and more goes until we get it right. As we get older, this feels uncomfortable: we feel foolish or embarrassed. Yet, if we can get over those feelings, if we can force ourselves out of our comfort zones, and consciously decide to take risks, make mistakes and improve, everything else gets better. There are only two big

mistakes:

- to be so frightened of making mistakes that we do nothing
- not to learn from our mistakes.

Web support

This book has been written with a companion website where we have put vidcasts, study packs, resource links and much, much more. Check out the website (<https://study.sagepub.com/burnsandsinfield4e/>) to see what we have for each chapter of the book.

We have also built the Study Hub, a website for students at our own university, and you are very welcome to use that as well – and to join our Study Chat Facebook group in which we post study advice and guidance throughout the year:

Study Hub website: <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/epacks/studyhub/>
Study Chat Facebook group: www.facebook.com/LondonMetStudyChat

Make a friend, write a blog

Learning is multi-modal, that is, we learn with many senses, in many ways and by using many strategies and resources. We learn by listening, watching, making, doing, reading, talking, writing and drawing – and we cover all these things. You can read this book – and then explore the web for additional reading and online tutorials – and we hope that you do that. At the same time, we have tried to make this book as comprehensive as possible – your complete guide to success at university.

We will ask you to discuss things quite a lot throughout this book – talking is really good active learning. Don't worry if you haven't got a university friend just yet – but do look out for one.

Even if you do have a classmate who is a friend – we suggest that you use Facebook, Twitter and other online spaces to talk through and reflect on your learning. Set up a new blog and use that to make useful notes on your student journey. See also [Chapters 8](#) and [10](#) which also discuss blogging your learning – from slightly different angles. Use or read student blogs or student video diaries and see what other people are writing about out there. A quick online search for student study blogs takes you to many examples to choose from.

To get the most from this book, we will want you to get involved by reading actively, making short notes and by writing about what you have learned. As we suggest in the title to this section – the best advice of all is to start your own blog, and blog about your learning. Telling others is a great way to reinforce our learning for ourselves.

Using this book

This is a book that you can work through step by step but it has also been designed so that you can dip into different sections when you feel they will be useful to you. The trick is to know what you want from each section of the book at any particular time.

Each chapter looks like this

Each chapter in this book has an overall theme and whilst there might be some slight changes in the presentation of material, certain things will recur throughout the book. Typically there will be:

- aims that state what we think the chapter will achieve
- an introduction to and presentation of information – coupled with, variously:
 - things for you to find out and activities for you to do
 - questions to answer
 - student and staff quotes
 - queries, discussion and commentary
- further reading and guides to resources, including online resources and work packs
- a summary that draws the chapter together and to a close
- tips and end of chapter activities.

Tips

- Before you start reading a chapter – think first: what do I know? What do I need? This gets you tuned in for success.
- Work through each chapter with notepad and pens at the ready. Make notes of the good stuff. Get involved with the activities.
- When you have finished a chapter, make the learning conscious: reflect or self-test: what do I know now? What would I tell someone else? Then blog it.

Students: “It opened up different strategies, learning strategies, and now I don’t feel inferior.”

Examiners: “This changes students’ lives, not just their study skills.”

Course leaders: “The effect on our students was like stardust.”

Personal skills review: strengths, needs, hopes and fears

In this section we ask you to reflect on your own strengths and needs – and to think about what it feels like to come to university. Before you have a look at comments shared by some of our students – have a quick brainstorm, then answer the questions in our personal skills review. Don’t think too much about your answers. This

is not about getting it 'right', it's about responding spontaneously.

- What are my strengths?
- What is it about me that has got me to university?

Now – answer these questions:

Figure 1.1 Personal skills review

1	How do you feel about yourself as a learner at the moment? Are you good at learning? Are you good at studying?
2	How positive do you feel about being a student? How committed are you to developing your study skills? What are you prepared to do to improve? How much time and energy are you prepared to put in?
3	How organised are you? (If you have brought up a family or juggled work with a hobby or family, then you are used to organising your life. This is a useful, transferable skill.)
4	If you have studied before, did you have set times to work? Do you have a place to study – a room, a desk, a table? Have you got an overall approach to studying? Do you feel you have successful strategies overall? What do you need to enable effective study?
5	What reading do you do at the moment? Are you happy with your reading skills? What do you think you need to make you a more successful academic reader?
6	How confident do you feel about using the library? Can you do successful online searches? Have you used journals or e-journals yet? What do you need here?
7	Do you make notes when you study? Are you happy with your notes? What do you do with your notes? What do you need to learn about notemaking?
8	What sorts of writing do you do at the moment (e.g. letters, blogs, emails, tweets, texts)? Have you written essays before? What sort of marks did you get? Are you happy with that? What do you want to get from the sections of the book that cover academic writing?
9	Have you ever had to make a presentation to a group of people? (A talk of a set length to a specific audience, usually on a specific topic.) How did it go? What do you feel about the idea of having to do presentations on your course? What do you want to know about presentations?
10	Have you revised for and sat exams? How did it go? How do you feel about your memory? How do you feel about exams? What do you need to know about revision and exam techniques?

How do you feel now? The questionnaire outlines the sorts of things you will need to do to study effectively – you cannot write an essay, for example, if you cannot organise your time, make useful notes or read academic texts. Hopefully you have gained a better picture of your own strengths and some of the qualities that you have already that will help you succeed. The rest of this book will take you through these processes in even more detail, so that you understand them and get the opportunity to practise and reflect upon them. You should also have an idea of some areas that you might like to work on – follow those up.

Tip

If your university runs a Personal Development Planning (PDP) system (see [Chapter 13.1](#)) – make notes on this skills review and put them in your PDP file: what strengths did you identify? What areas are you going to work on?

What our students have said about coming to university

No matter how much you wanted to go to university, once you get there, you will typically experience an emotional rollercoaster: you may be nervous – you may be excited. You are looking forward to all the people and experiences – and you are ter-

rified that you will not make any friends, and that you will not cope with the work. We have captured some of the things that our students have said to us about what coming to university felt like for them – have a look and see if any of their feelings match your own – and be reassured – all these feelings can be dealt with: they, we, you can survive and do well.

Do you recognise any of these feelings? Are any of these you? How do you feel now after reading all these? Sharing our fears can show us that fear is normal – and solutions are possible. A quick antidote to a quivering mass of fear, though, is to start to think positively about your way forward; so we conclude this first chapter with a look at the six steps to successful study. Read through that [next section](#) – making notes of all the tips, tricks and advice and make notes of what you are going to do with that information.

I'm not sure that I'll find enough time to study. I'm not organised and I know that I'll have to be if I want to work, study and maintain my family and friends.

I'm apprehensive about how my studies will affect the rest of my life. Being a student is going to have a dramatic impact on my life, I can see that. But I wanted to do this course – so I'll have to work out how to make it work.

I find it hard to concentrate for long periods.

My memory isn't as good as it used to be.

I haven't written an essay for ages and I'm anxious about putting pen to paper ...

I'm worried because English isn't my first language; my daughter is better at English than I am and she has said that she will help me. She also thinks that I'm being very brave studying in English – which makes me feel strong instead of foolish.

I'm worried that I'll find it hard to cope with the difficult reading. I wish I could read faster. I have heard that academic reading does get easier with practice – I certainly hope so.

I'm not very good at spelling. I'm never sure when to use a comma or a full stop. I've forgotten all the rules of grammar.

I'm going to use the spell checker on my computer. I've also heard that you need to build up your own dictionary of all the new words and names that you're learning. I've already bought a small exercise book to do this.

I hated school – why on earth did I think I could cope with university?

I am worried that the work will be difficult and I won't be able to understand it; but I am going to try to be brave and learn from my mistakes. I'm going to ask questions if I don't understand what's going on.

Six steps to successful study

'If you are in halls, make friends with the people there. If you are in a student flat, make an effort to integrate and make friends on your course. If you live at home, make sure you spend as much time in the university as possible: it's about being there! It's about being with the other students!'

Are you the first in your family to go to university? Are you an international student worried that you won't fit in? Are you leaving home for the first time and homesick? Are you angry that you are not leaving home? Are you feeling old, thinking that you are unlikely to make friends – or worried that you're too young and inexperienced to do well? Well you are not alone. No – seriously – everybody tends to feel bad about their student selves. Everybody else looks like they know what they're doing – and you're the only one who looks, sounds and feels like a fool. This is not true. Mostly we feel this way because it's natural – everybody does; sometimes we feel this way because we have not consciously learned how to study and learn. The [next chapter](#) explores that in more detail. In the meantime, here is a quick guide to successful study.

The six steps

Our work suggests that there are certain approaches to study that promote engagement, active learning and success. We call these the six steps to study success, SOCCER, and they inform this book. For a quick overview, read the sections below and think about how you can put them into practice in your studies.

Figure 1.2 Six steps to success

1	Study techniques can be learnt – good students are made, not born
2	Overview is vital – everybody needs the big picture
3	Creativity is essential – and can be developed
4	Communicate effectively – in the correct form
5	Emotions rule – dealing with the whole you is crucial
6	Review – without reflection there is no learning

1 Study techniques can be learned – good students are made, not born

It is all too easy to think that we are not 'cut out' for studying. Bad school experiences can make people believe that studying is not for them – they are not good students. But why should you know how to study effectively? If you wanted to be a firefighter or a farmer or a chef or a carpenter you would know that you would have to learn how to be one. If we think of studying like this it can become easier. All the way through this book we will look at the constituent study and academic skills that can help you to succeed. In terms of developing your study techniques consider:

- the Survival Kit section, which explores the key study and academic skills that you need to really do well at university
- the Big Assessment Toolkits, which explore firstly how to approach assignments – and secondly how to do well in the different sorts of assignments you are set at university.

‘Why didn’t they tell us this before? I left school feeling like a complete failure – but it was just that I didn’t know how to learn. These techniques have given me such a boost. I feel really confident now.’

2 Overview is vital – everybody needs the big picture

Whilst it is true that we tend to learn things in pieces, one step at a time, this is helped if we have the big picture first – if we know how the subject will be covered. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle, it is much easier to put the pieces together if we have the picture on the box. Similarly, if we understand how universities work and how our courses have been put together, we will be able to achieve more, more swiftly. Have a look at:

- The Big Assessment Toolkit: How to Make Sense of Your Course

‘I really hated school; not knowing what was going on and why. Using the ‘overview’ has made all the difference. I’m now on top.’

3 Creativity is essential – and can be developed

There is a lot of ‘common sense’ about being a successful student – it is common sense to be well organised, to make time each day for study. There’s nothing wrong with common sense, we know students who have gained good degrees with common sense and sheer hard work. However, if you want to do that little bit more, if you want studying to be a little bit easier and more interesting, then a touch of creativity is needed.

If you give back to lecturers what they have told you, if you just use their examples and read the books that they recommend, then you will be a strong, average student. To get a little further you have to be creative, you have to go somewhere or think something different. How can you do that? We discuss creativity generally, and explore creative ways to approach assignments and notemaking. We take you through techniques that encourage a different or more original approach to your studies. Look at:

- The Survival Kit sections:
 - How to Make the Best Notes
 - How to Be Creative and Visual
 - How to Be Analytical and Critical
- The Big Assessment Toolkit: Probably the Most Important Thing on Writing You’ll Ever Read

‘At school I was told to go away and get a job in a shop (sorry shop workers!), that I would never be able to learn anything. Putting colour and pictures

into my university work has made all the difference; now I get As for my assignments.'

4 Communicate effectively – in the correct form

'They used to write things like 'there's no introduction' or 'there's no conclusion' on my essays. But no one ever told me what these were – or why they wanted them. Now I only have to worry about my ideas, I know how to present them.'

Just as we cannot 'know' how to study, we may not 'know' what an essay, report or presentation is. These things have specific shapes to them (what), they have specific purposes (why) and there are tried and tested ways of approaching them (how). In order to help you develop successful assessment techniques, we discuss effective communication in the context of essays, reports, dissertations, presentations and seminars. See:

- The Big Assessment Toolkit: Cracking Assessment – The Ten Step Approach to Better Assignments
- The Big Assessment Toolkit: Assessments – How To Excel

5 Emotions rule – dealing with the whole you is crucial

Studying and learning are seen as 'brain' activities: cognitive and intellectual, but they are 'body' activities as well: we can learn by doing and making – as well as by reading and writing; and for most of us studying can be fraught with emotion also. When we first start a course we are apprehensive, nervous or even terrified. If we do not admit our own emotional responses to university issues, we cannot address them, and we will never be able to benefit from our positive responses or overcome our negative ones.

Check out what our students have to say about positive thinking on our Study Hub website:

- <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/studyhub/positive.html>.

In this book, see especially:

- The Starter Kit: Make University Positive

'You ask what the first day was like? I was het up, frightened, terrified ... I thought 'Why the hell have I done this to myself?' I just wanted to run away ... Oh I love it now, I don't want to leave!'

6 Review – without reflection there is no learning

Learning is process and learning is active, it involves an active selection of what to learn and how to learn it, it involves self-testing and review. Throughout the book we will be examining different memory and revision strategies, including reflective learning logs and Personal Development Planning. We also want you to reflect and self-test after every chapter – and to explore and reflect on how you learned what you did. Learning and remembering are not necessarily automatic or simple, but we can learn how to do these effectively and we have structured the book to reinforce this. To explore this in more depth go to:

- The Survival Kit: How to Be Reflective
- The Big Assessment Toolkit: How to Excel: How to Revise for and Pass Exams
- The Employability Kit: PDP and HEAR

‘I love doing my learning logs, it makes me make sense of what I’m doing. If I didn’t do my logs, I don’t think I’d understand anything at all.’

Summary

To set the context for ESS4, we have briefly introduced ourselves – and introduced the book itself – making suggestions as to how to use ESS4 successfully. We moved on to consider some of the emotional dimensions of being a student – reassuring you that you can survive your feelings, but emphasising that you will need to shift outside of your comfort zone in order to make the most of university – to grow.

Coming to university can be unsettling and change can be uncomfortable; we looked at some typical hopes and fears about becoming a university student. If you also have some of the feelings written about in this chapter – we hope it reassures you – you are not alone. Fear is normal, but there is usually something we can do about our fears – and in that light, we introduced you to the six steps to study success. We have argued that good students, like you, are made, not born. If you build SOCCER into your study habits every day, you will make real progress.

Activity

The checklist

- Enjoy being a student.
- Help your family and friends realise how important being a student is to you.
- Have a regular place to study – when you sit there your body will learn to work.
- Move out of your comfort zone – make mistakes and learn from them.
- Concentrate for 15 minute blocks at first and build up.
- Work for half an hour every day
- Make some time to study every week day. Turn off your phone, don’t answer the door.
- Focus.
- Write something every day – your reflective blog?
- Develop your memory ([Chapter 12.6](#)).
- Discover if you like working alone – or with other people.
- Discover if you like working with noise or quiet.

- Discover if you like working in the morning, afternoon, evening or night.
- If English isn't your first language join an academic English class.
- Buy an English dictionary, a subject dictionary and a dictionary of sociological terms.
- Buy an exercise book and make your own subject dictionary.
- Write new theories, words and phrases on Post-its and stick them up all round your home. Take them down when you know them.
- Prioritise, make lists, use a diary, use a 24/7 timetable.
- Sometimes be very organised ... Sometimes sit amongst a pile of work and plunge in.
- Enjoy studying, do not see it as 'work'.
- Use deadlines to keep you on track.
- If unhappy with your spelling, punctuation or grammar, buy a simple grammar book and use it.
- Keep a small notebook with you. When you have a bright idea or insight, write it down.
- Find a friend, get a study partner, use online discussion boards, set up your own blog and write about your studies and your learning.

'And you go, yes, and it really spurs you on!'

Access the companion website to this book and find helpful resources for this chapter topic: <https://study.sagepub.com/burnsandsinfield4e>