**2018/19**

**Top Tips**

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**preparation for higher education**

**academic skills**

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**1. Lectures**

**1. Be prepared**

* Before the lecture – be prepared. These points will help you to familiarise yourself with the topic, terminology, and language of the lecture enabling easier note-making.
* Read the lecture synopsis.
* Read the appropriate reading materials, making notes.
* At a suitable time before the lecture, read your notes.
* Read the notes from the previous lecture.

**2. Listen**

* During the lecture – listen. Listening is an important activity for making notes; having done step 1 above; you will be more in tune with the lecture, therefore listening and note-making are easier.
* Make sure that you have a seat where you can see and hear the lecturer.
* Avoid distractions: sitting at the front of the room often helps with this.
* Pay attention – you only have this opportunity to hear/see this lecture.
* Listen and look for signals e.g. “This may be useful for your assignment”,   
  “There are 4 main points in this . . .”
* If a point is repeated it usually means that it is very important.
* Make sure that you copy anything that is put on the board/overhead projector – this may not be in handouts.
* Make sure that any points you are confused with, or didn’t understand, are clarified. Ask questions.

**3. Do not doodle**

This is a distracter and breaks concentration.

**4. Organise**

* Organise your notes.
* Separate folders for each course.
* Label, number and date all pages.

**5. Highlight**

Highlight important information

**6. Use abbreviations**

Use abbreviations – be consistent.

**7. Use symbols**

* To indicate if you don’t understand something: ?
* To indicate something you want to find out more about: !!!
* To indicate something that you want to incorporate into an assignment, or something that you agree with: √

**8. Review your notes**

* After the lecture, review your notes.
* Combine the notes from the previous reading materials with the notes you have made during the lecture.
* Keep one set of good notes.
* File other notes away.

Combining your notes is not copying your notes; by having a set of complete notes, you will have notes that make sense when you retrieve them later. Reviewing your notes also helps to move information from your short-term memory into your long-term memory. You are also starting to revise for assignments, essays and exams.

**9. Share notes**

Share notes with others in your class. You may have something important in your notes that others may not have and vice versa.

**10. Listening and note-making are skills**

The more you practise, the more skilled you will become.

**2. Tutorials**

**1. Be prepared**

You will find the topics for tutorials usually listed in the course handbook while example sheets may be given out in lectures or may be found on your course area on your university’s virtual learning environment. This means that you are expected to do preparatory reading or complete some example sheets before the tutorial.

**2. Make links**

The tutorial system relates to the content of the lecture programme but sometimes they do not necessarily tie in sequentially with each other. This means that it is important that you identify the links between tutorials, additional reading and assignments.

**3. Think ahead**

What issues might arise on the chosen topic and what is your view on these? If you have examples to do, don’t just do the easy ones, but aim to do the more difficult ones so that you can discuss any difficulties with your tutor or demonstrator.

**4. Participate**

Some people are not hesitant about voicing their views or about asking questions. Others are often reluctant to do so. If you are one of the former, remember that participating in a tutorial can often mean listening as well as speaking. If you are more reluctant to speak, recognise that your ideas are just as valid as the next person’s and that you are just as entitled to voice them as anyone else. The more diffident student may often be the one with the best ideas, so speak out!

**5. Stick to the tutorial topic**

Sometimes students have queries about the lecture programme and want to discuss these in the tutorial. If you have such a query, then make an appointment to discuss it with the appropriate lecturer or send your query as an email. Most lecturers welcome this demonstration of interest in the course and will give you some guidance or refer you to a printed source in the course.

**6. Involve others**

Sometimes you may feel that you’re doing all the work – or talking – and others may be more than willing to let you take on that burden. Involve peers by asking someone else for their opinion or asking a question of the tutorial leader. Think about how you might phrase this – “Maybe someone else has a different/similar view?” or “What do you think about this, so and so?”

**7. Take notes**

The tutorial is an opportunity to explore topics in greater detail than covered in the lecture. Therefore, your tutorial notes can feed into your assignments or later exam revision. If you ensure that you title and date them, you will have a ready resource to file alongside the lecture notes.

**8. Contributing to the discussion**

Tutorial discussion can become heated. However, it is important to remember that you are learning how to discuss issues objectively and should not take contradiction from either a college or the tutorial leader as a personal slight. The purpose of debate is to train students to present their viewpoints with a sound argument supported by evidence – and someone who is critical of your viewpoint may simply be exploring the issue from other directions as a kind of devil’s advocate.

**9. Assessment**

If you are asked a direct question on the topic, would you be able to answer it? Your participation in tutorials, or the worked examples you need to complete in them – may contribute to your assessment. This means that it is important to contribute to the discussion as this will be monitored – just being there is not enough.

**10. Developing skills**

Recognise that the skills you need for tutorials translate into employment skills. For example, participating in case conferences, meetings with clients and planning meetings within an organisation. This is your chance to hone your skills for the future.

**3. Research**

**1. Ask questions all the time**

What do you know? What do you need to know more about? What do you not know? Never stop asking questions. Treat your research like explorers treat their journeys – always looking around them, picking up new information, thinking about where next to head. So you can use your questions to ask yourself how much you are understanding and what you need to research next to help you complete your coursework tasks.

**2. Is what you’re reading relevant? Will it help you answer your questions?**

There might be times when you can read about the subjects you are studying for personal pleasure and take your time over it – enjoy those moments. More familiar might be the times when you have a deadline pressing and you can’t afford to read anything that won’t be directly useful. Think as you research whether or not what you are reading is helping you. Have you answered your questions about that aspect of the topic? Do you know enough about it for now to move on? What new questions do you have as a result of what you have read?

**3. Who is the author? Can you trust him/her?**

Another question to ask about your research sources is whether or not you can trust them. You need to be sure that the author is trustworthy. Information on sites such as Wikipedia, for example, is not to be relied upon as it may not be objective. One way of testing this is to check the other things you are reading to find out whether or not other authors you have been reading reference them.

**4. Why was it written? Who was the intended audience? What’s the author’s agenda?**

Another test for whether you can trust an author is to ask whether they had hidden motives for what they were writing. That’s less likely with academic sources that have been reviewed by other academics before publication, but still not impossible.

**5. When was it written? And is it still up to date?**

Some of the subjects you will study develop fast so how recently the source was published is important to know. Is it still relevant? Are there new angles on the subject that you should also be finding out about?

**6. Is every argument backed up by facts or are they just assertions?**

It can be easy to trust every author you read simply because they write convincingly. Don’t let yourself take that easy route. Be bold and challenge what you are reading. Why do you agree/disagree with it? What reasons do you have? How can you defend those reasons?

**7. Have you understood everything?**

If not, what can you do to fill in the gaps?

**8. Has it answered all your questions?**

What were you hoping to achieve when you started your research? How much of that have you managed? For the questions you started out with, how many are still to be answered? Are they worth continuing with?

**9. What new questions do you have?**

The questions you started with were just that – starting points. Now your research has told you much more about the subject you are exploring, what new questions do you have? How can you try to answer them?

**10. Think for yourself. Don’t just repeat other people’s ideas.**

Having the chance to think for yourself and present your own ideas can be one of the great things about higher education. Enjoy that opportunity and make the most of it. Sadly that can also be one of the hardest things. It takes a lot of hard work before you can know enough to come up with some good ideas that require more time and effort through research to test. Work hard.

**4. Presentations**

**1. Be prepared**

Think about what you have been asked to do in terms of time. Research the topic and then brainstorm the points that you feel apply to the focus of your presentation. Construct a running order for these and then begin to flesh out what you would like to say on each point.

**2. Make links**

You need to think about how you will map the presentation for your listeners. You need to think about how you will frame the introduction and create links throughout your talk so that it flows naturally and logically from point to point. Work on a strong ending that summarises your points to ensure that you don’t end with a weak “That’s all I have to say!”

**3. Stick to the topic**

It is tempting to provide background information and sometimes this can be at the expense of the time you can devote to the key points you wish to make. It is better to make a conscious decision to assume some foundation knowledge on the part of your listeners and concentrate on the key points of your argument or appraisal of the topic.

**4. Write/print out script**

Speaking without notes is an approach that is loaded with risk. It is better to have put your ideas on paper and then practised how you might deliver this text, thinking about pauses, phrasing, intonation and expression.

**5. Practise**

It is important that you are aware of how long your presentation takes to deliver and so you should practise this against the clock. Bearing in mind that most people speak faster when under stress, edit or expand your written notes.

**6. Create cue cards or short notes**

Simply reading out a script does not make for an interesting or enlivened delivery. Try condensing what you say to notes on cue cards that allow you to sound more natural in your delivery.

**7. Practise again**

With a friend, practise again using the cue cards and timing yourself as you do so.  
It is not generally a good idea to try to memorise your written script because it is too easy to lose the place if you are nervous, but if you practise thoroughly you should become so familiar with your material that the cue cards will be enough to act as prompts for your presentation.

**8. Read your audience**

If you smile at the audience as you introduce yourself and your topic, they will warm to you and you to them. Establishing this rapport at the outset is a critical element of successful presentations. You can do this also by asking the audience a question, by relating your topic to an earlier presentation or by narrating a personal experience.

**9. Speak clearly**

Not everyone in your audience may have perfect hearing; some may be speakers of other languages. Sometimes external noise or poor acoustics can inhibit people’s ability to hear the speaker, so it is particularly important that you speak clearly and precisely in standard English so that your message is received by all.

**10. Assessment and developing skills**

Making presentations is a skill that develops with practice and experience. Take every opportunity to gain that experience and you will find that, as your confidence grows, your competence will increase and this will be reflected in your assessment marks.

**5. Revision**

**1. Get yourself organised**

The key to successful revision is to be fully aware of what your course is about – this means that you need to have a full set of lecture notes, handouts and notes from your own supplementary reading. Once you have all that in place, then you are ready to begin.

**2. Make links**

Go to the past exam papers (possibly available in your library or online) and identify the style of questions, the topics that frequently come up and match these against the learning objectives (or outcomes) of your course and the time devoted to these topics in the lecture programme. Make a list of these topics and identify which you have covered in tutorials or assignments. From this list select the topics that you intend to revise, making sure that you have some topics ‘in reserve’ so that, should your favourite topics not come up, you still have options open to you.

**3. Think ahead**

Create a blank timetable of the time you have before your exam. Working backwards from the date of your exam, plot in other commitments and then block in the time that you have available to cover your chosen topics. Be sure to leave some time for daily things such as eating, shopping and relaxing.

**4. Revising**

For some people, revision is a chore that quickly becomes boring and unproductive. To ensure that you are engaged with what you are trying to learn, you might think about reducing your lecture notes, handouts and other materials to short notes. Alternatively, you might think of taping your notes and listening to these as you travel or do other things when you are not studying. Much of this will depend on your favoured natural learning style.

**5. Think about ‘double’ questions**

Sometimes exam questions draw on more than one topic from the lecture course, so it is important to think about logical connections, comparisons or contrasts that just might ask you to cover two topics in a single question. For example a question such as “Consider whether Napoleon’s contribution to the French legal system outweighed his contribution to France’s international power” requires an understanding of both the legal code and international policies.

**6. Involve others**

Some people find that discussing the topics with friends doing the same course by quizzing each other can be a useful way of imprinting the ideas in their minds. Family members act as oral examiners. Voicing your answers can provide a rehearsal for the exam and this kind of activity also makes those around you feel less distanced from your activities.

**7. Practise planning answers**

Working out plans for potential questions is a good revision tactic. It not only helps you to work out logical connections between the points of an argument or the sequence of operations you might need to perform in the exam, but it also helps you to do this quickly and efficiently in the exam. Sometimes you will receive a mark or two for the plan if you have been unable to finish an answer but seem to have been writing on the right lines.

**8. Work out the timings**

Before the exam, work out exactly how much time that you will have to answer each question, ensuring that you take into account time needed for reading the question, doing a brief plan, writing your answer and checking it afterwards.

**9. Practise writing answers**

Many students find that they have difficulty writing to a time limit so it is worthwhile trying to write your answer against the clock. You need to discipline yourself not to write beyond the allotted span of time as you won’t be able to overrun beyond the end of the allocated time on the day.

**10. Specialist terms**

While marks may not be deducted for misspelling of general vocabulary, you may find that penalties are imposed if you misspell subject-specific words. For example, a politics student would be expected to know how to spell “government” or a biology student would be expected to know how to spell “mitochondrion.”

**6. Exams**

**1. Be prepared**

Check out the date, time and location of the exam. Make sure that you know how long it will take to travel to the exam hall, where you can park (if necessary) and that you have all the necessary equipment such as pens, calculators, highlighters and watch.

**2. Think ahead**

Rehearse the time that you can allocate to each question on the paper and have prepared plans for potential questions (See Tips for Revision). Be sure that you know what format the exam takes – essay answers, worked examples, multiple choice questions, short answer questions or open book.

**3. Think positively**

If you have worked at your revision and have practised well, then you should be confident in your ability to handle whatever the exam paper contains. If you have not prepared as well as you might, then this is the time to put your brain in gear and attempt to answer as fully as you can. Blank paper gains no marks and if you apply yourself, you may well be able to squeeze some marks even out of the most unlikely questions.

**4. Confront your nerves**

Even the best prepared student can be overcome by nerves. But nerves can also be a good thing; they can sharpen your senses and provide you with a focused frame of mind. Often the nerves diminish once the paper is turned over and you can see what you have to work on. If your favourite topics have not turned up, then take a deep breath and focus on the strongest alternatives on the paper. You may surprise yourself about what you know.

**5. Making choices**

Sometimes students are ‘spoilt for choice’ in that they are faced with many ‘good’ questions, all of which they feel they could answer well. A good way to make that choice is to give each question a score out of 5 (high) as a reflection of how strong they feel their answer would be on that question. Clearly, those that score highest are the ones to tackle.

**6. Stick to the time plan**

There is evidence that suggests that the marks you gain from spending extra time on one question are less than the marks you could gain from stopping that one on time and moving on to a new question.

**7. Checking over your work**

In the rush to get your thoughts on paper and to keep to the time limit, it is all too easy to make slips. Make an allowance of time in your time-plan for the exam to go over your answers and to check for spelling and grammar mistakes, as well as factual and logical errors. Be sure that you have included all work and that you remember basics such as entering the units in your answer.

**8. Being methodical**

Do not be put off by others around you who have ripped straight into an answer. Take time to consider the question and to plan your answer so that it responds to that question and not the one you would have liked to have been asked.

**9. Developing skills**

Taking exams at university will eventually become routine and you may even begin to enjoy that feeling of being on top of your subject – that is, engaging in deep learning. However, it takes time to develop exam skills and you should welcome the chance to develop these skills as you work through your courses. While exemptions from exams are often welcome (and some students specifically adopt this as a strategy to avoid exams) in the long term, this means a missed opportunity at becoming a good examinee and this may have an impact on your performance in final year exams.

**10. Assessment**

Examination assessment should reflect the stated aims and objectives of the course. In some subjects, it may be possible to gain “full marks” that reflect the classification of degrees. You should be informed of how your exams will be marked and what the repercussions are if you do not perform satisfactorily and this may involve undertaking a re-sit examination.