



Queen Mary
University of London

Queen Mary University of London Academic Study Skills Guide



qmul.ac.uk

How to use this guide

At Queen Mary University of London, we are focused on doing everything we can for both our current students and for you, our future students. Academic support starts long before you get to campus on your first day. As such, the Queen Mary Academic Study Skills Guide has been created to help you make that transition from school into university life by helping you familiarise yourself with key study skills.

The guide complements Queen Mary's Academic Study Skills online course that students are also encouraged to complete, and additionally can be used to support classroom activities with students, delivered in partnership with Queen Mary or independently.

As you work through this guide you will have opportunities to reflect on and evaluate your own skill set, as well as learning and practicing some techniques that will help enhance your learning at university.

The guide is most suitable for students in Years 12 and 13, who will soon make the transition to higher education. However, developing the skills covered in this guide will also offer benefits to students in earlier stages of their education.

We hope you find this guide useful, and that it enables you to tackle your studies with confidence and excel in them.

Contents

Clicking on the below chapter headings will take you directly to the relevant section of this guide.

1. Academic study skills explored	4
1.1 Critical thinking	5
1.2 Time management	6
1.3 Note taking	8
1.4 Essay writing	10
1.5 Revision	12
2. Skills audit	14
3. Skill development plan	15
4. You and your learning	16
4.1 What sort of learner are you?	16
4.2 Maximising your Learning	17
4.3 Your golden rules for learning	18
5. Helpful study skills resources	20
6. References	21

1. Academic study skills explored

There are a variety of academic study skills that students must use every day in higher education. These are a mix of thinking skills that require students to routinely question, criticise and reflect, and practical skills and techniques that are important for completing university-level assignments and projects.

For an in-depth look at some academic study skills that are important for success at university (and if you haven't already done so), you are encouraged to complete our **Academic Study Skills online course**.

This guide will focus on the following academic study skills:

- Critical Thinking
- Time Management
- Note Taking
- Essay Writing
- Revision

1.1 Critical thinking

What is it?

Critical thinking is all about not accepting information that you are presented with at face value, but instead questioning it and drawing conclusions from your own evidence-based analysis.

Why is it important?

Being able to question ideas and arguments, and thinking about topics in different ways are vital skills at university. When reviewing your work, teachers at university will often look for evidence that you have thought critically about a topic, and that you can explain your own (evidence-based) point of view on the topic coherently.

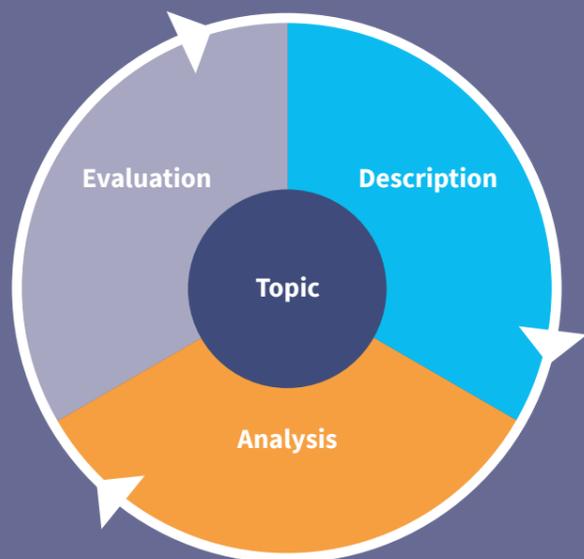
Having critical thinking skills means you can:

- Think about a topic in a critical way
- Find links between different concepts or ideas, and use these to come up with new ideas of your own ('synthesis')
- Reflect on, and question, your own beliefs, opinions and assumptions
- Construct well-reasoned arguments based on evidence
- Critique arguments, recognising strengths and weaknesses in the evidence

How can you develop this skill?

A model for critical thinking has been developed by *Learnhigher*², who are a network for learning development in higher education. The model recommends taking the following critical thinking approach when presented with an idea:

- **Description:** ask 'what?', 'when?', 'who?' and 'where?'
- **Analysis:** ask 'how?' and 'why?'
- **Evaluation:** ask 'so what?', 'what if...?' and 'what next?'



Critical Thinking - example:

Sixth Form student Anna is completing an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ). Her project will investigate the effects of nutrition and diet on overall health and wellbeing.

As part of her investigation, Anna thinks critically about some existing research that she finds on the effects of red meat consumption. Below are some questions that she asks herself about the research:

Model for critical thinking			
Topic	Description	Analysis	Evaluation
Research in to the effects of red meat consumption on overall health and wellbeing	<p>What is the purpose of the research?</p> <p>Who is the intended audience for the research?</p> <p>When was the research conducted?</p>	<p>How was the research data collected?</p> <p>Why was the specific approach to conducting the research chosen?</p>	<p>Why is this important? ('So what?')</p> <p>What if peoples' gender/ethnicity is accounted for? Are the effects different?</p> <p>What happened next as a result of the research?</p>



1.2 Time management

What is it?

Time management is the process of planning and managing how much time you spend on specific activities.

Managing your time effectively at university will help you complete tasks on time and to the required standard, and will enable you to build in time for any non-study activities, which are also a valuable part of university life.

Why is it important?

At university you are likely to be involved with many activities that require you to make a time commitment. For students these often include:

- Studying - lessons, assignments and revision
- Sport and exercise
- Student societies
- Part-time work, work experience and volunteering
- Hobbies and interests
- Socialising

Good time management is key to ensuring that you are able to stay in control of your studies, whilst also having the time to engage with any extra-curricular activities that are important to you.



How can you develop this skill?

UCAS have partnered with the National Extension College (NEC) to produce a Time Management guide² for students. Just a few of the tips that are featured in the guide are:

- **Set realistic goals**
Setting goals for yourself can keep you motivated to study by giving you something to aim for and providing you with a frequent sense of achievement when your goals are met. Regularly asking 'for how long...', 'how much...' and 'by when...' will help you ensure that your goals are realistic, and recording your goals (e.g. on a wall chart, in a spreadsheet or using a free phone app) and keeping them visible will help keep you accountable to them.
- **Prioritise**
Make lists of all the tasks you need to complete, then put them in order of when you will complete them based on factors such as how long they will take to complete and when the deadline is for their completion.
- **Five-for-Five**
When you have a spare 5 minutes - whilst waiting for the kettle to boil or for the microwave to ping - use a piece of paper to quickly:
 1. **Take stock** - jot down things you already know about a subject you are about to study, to underline that you have a head start.
 2. **Make a summary** of something complex you have studied recently, to consolidate your studying.
 3. **Write questions** about a topic you have to study and are keen to know more about, to show yourself that your motivation levels are high.
 4. **Test yourself** - perhaps on something you feel relatively confident about, to boost your confidence.
 5. **Revisit** by having a quick look at something you have already studied, to remind yourself how much you already know.

Top Queen Mary student tip for prioritisation:

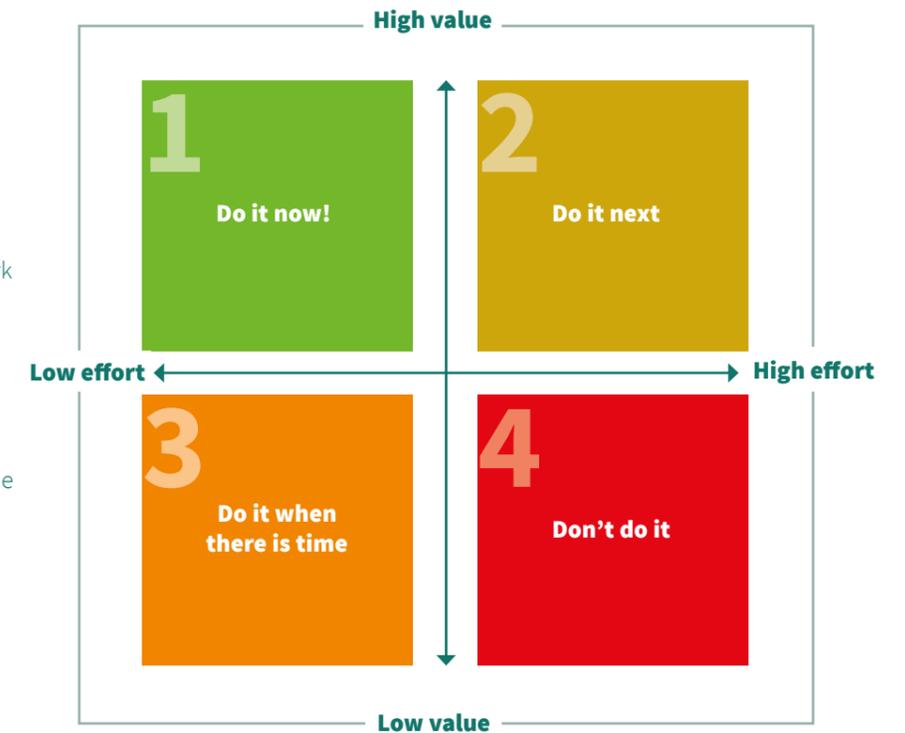
Maliha, who is in her third year of her Dentistry course, shares her approach to prioritisation:



I prioritise tasks as high/medium/low based on:

- Weather it is formative or summative
- The weightage of the assignment/work towards my final grade
- The time the task will take and when the deadline is
- How much the task will help me towards making me a better clinician.
- Level of difficulty: I like to complete harder tasks firsts as they are more time consuming.

Maliha, Dentistry 3rd year



The above value/effort matrix comes from two authors; Michael Brassard (The Memory Jogger 2, 2010) and David Allen (Getting Things Done, 2001).

1. Academic study skills explored

1.3 Note taking

What is it?

Note taking is the process of writing down and organising the information that is covered in your lessons or whilst you study.

Note taking isn't about writing down everything your lecturers say, or copying word-for-word out of a textbook. Rather, note taking should be about summarising information, and presenting it in a form that provides the essential points in a clear and memorable way.

A good set of notes contains:

- Clear headings and subheadings for each topic
- Any authors or references you need to remember
- Key points, examples, and any formulae, theories or names you need to learn
- Additional reading to follow up with
- Your own note taking aids – e.g. mnemonics, highlighted information or diagrams

Why is it important?

Good notes will help you to engage with what you are learning, so you'll be more likely to remember it. Being able to refer to a high quality set of notes will also support your revision when it comes to the time of your exams.

How can you develop this skill?

Techniques that you can develop to support your note taking include:

Identifying key words

Identifying key words is an important part of note taking. Using the margins to make a note of words and phrases, and highlighting/bolding/underlining are all useful methods for ensuring that key words are emphasised and reinforced within your notes.

Using abbreviations and symbols

Having a system of abbreviations can help to speed up your note taking. Common abbreviations and symbols used in note taking include:

w/	with
esp.	especially
↓ / ↑	increase / decrease
> / <	more than / less than

Mind mapping

Creating mind maps can be a useful way to present your notes. This method of arranging information can also be a good revision technique, and could be particularly helpful for visual learners (covered later in this guide).

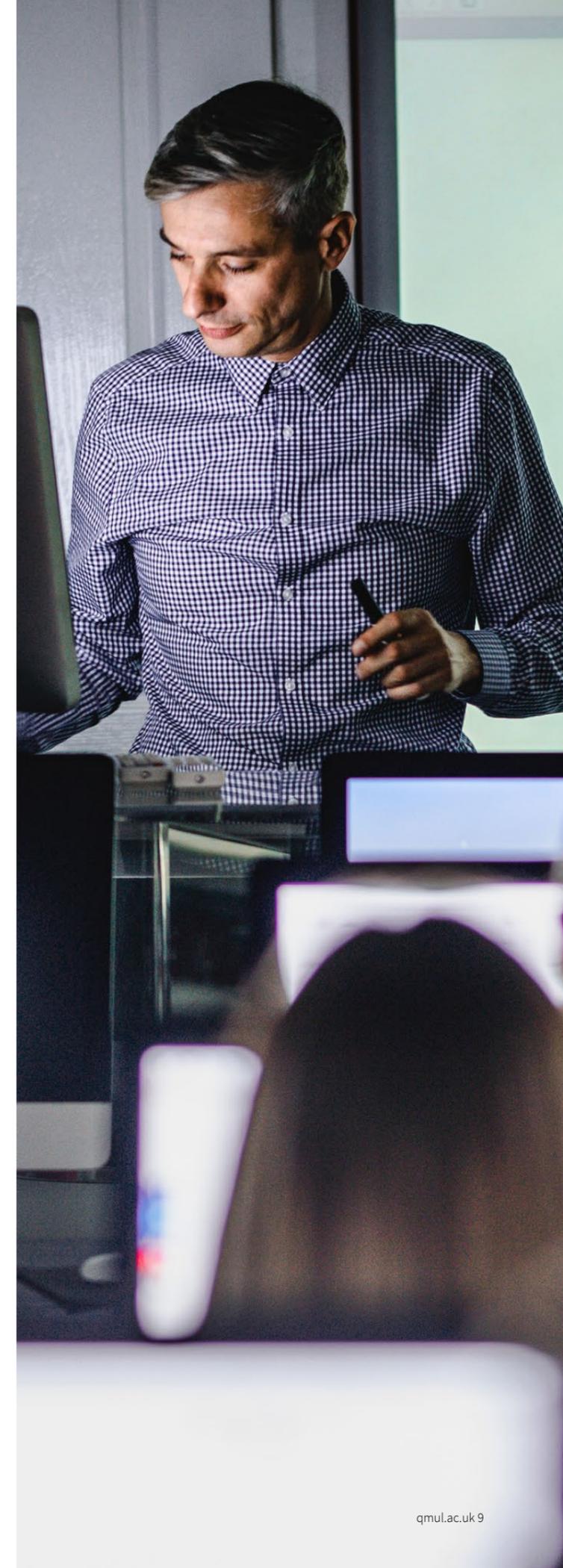
Top Queen Mary student tip for note taking:

Jannat, who is in her third year of her Dentistry course, shares her top note taking tips:

“

I take all my notes and turn them into questions. It is a good way for me to understand what the notes are trying to tell me and whether I have any gaps in my knowledge. If there is anything I don't understand or I don't put together I can then ask myself the questions any time and improve my recall. It also allows me to prepare for type A questions in the exam (in physics, type A questions are recall, minor derivations and vocabulary. Type B questions are new questions which require you to apply your current knowledge to them).

Jannat, Physics 2nd year



1.4 Essay writing

What is it?

Essays are writing assignments that are used to present an author's point of view on a specific topic by bringing together ideas, arguments and evidence.

Despite being based on similar fundamental principles, essay writing at university is likely to be different to what students have experienced before at school or college, and generally requires a higher level of sophistication to produce academic essays of the required standard.

Why is it important?

Naturally, some university courses will involve more essay writing than others, such as those related to the humanities and social sciences. However, it is helpful to remember that even subjects with a more scientific or practical orientation often require students to write essays. In fact, every course that is offered includes some form of essay writing at Queen Mary!

Teachers at university will be looking for evidence that your essays are well-researched, have a sound structure and that your key arguments are coherent and well-developed.

How can you develop this skill?

UCAS and the NEC have produced guides for students related to academic essay writing³ and proofing and editing your work⁴. Their approach to producing high quality university-level essays can be broken down into the following four stages:

1. Pre-writing

Pre-writing involves thinking about how to address the essay question or statement you've been presented with.

Identifying key verbs and ideas in the title can help you to decide on the approach you will take to writing the essay. Then, once you understand what you're being asked to do, you can create a mind map to identify what you already know about the topic, and where the gaps in your knowledge are, to allow you to do the required research and draw together the different information sources that you will need.

2. Planning

Here is where you'll review all of the information you have collected in the pre-writing stage, and decide what information to keep and what to leave out. You'll summarise, expand, rearrange, and make corrections.

When creating your essay plan, you should:

- Aim to create a plan that is roughly one side of A4 in length
- Aim to make about four points in the main body of the essay
- Discard material that doesn't support your arguments
- Draw on the main points for the introduction and conclusion. Some students find it easier to plan the introduction and conclusion after they have thought through the main points

3. Drafting

This is where you'll pull together all of your research and planning work in to a draft version of your essay. You'll review, reconsider and rewrite what you have already produced, and write new sections as necessary.

Expect to have to re-draft parts of your essay, or even all of it, and allow yourself breaks to come back and re-visit what you've written; many students find it easier to spot issues this way.

4. Proof-reading and editing

Once you're happy with the overall structure and content of your essay, it's important to proof read and edit it. This helps you to ensure that your work is written in a style you're happy with, is free of errors and that it meets the requirements of your essay brief.

It involves checking on a number of things, including that:

- Your punctuation, grammar and spelling is correct
- Your sentences aren't unnecessarily wordy
- Things are ordered in a sensible way
- Your points are backed up with evidence
- You have included appropriate references and citations
- You are within the word count



1.5 Revision

What is it?

Revision is the process of reviewing content that you have covered as part of your course, usually in preparation for exams.

Why is it important?

How well you perform with your exams will be influenced in large part by how well you have revised.

As well as helping you to retain as much information as possible, having a good system of revision can also help to reduce anxiety and stress levels, which will support you to be at your best when the time of your exams arrives.

How can you develop this skill?

It can be helpful to break the revision process down in to stages, consisting of your revision planning and the effective revision strategies you use.

Planning your revision

Planning your revision can include creating a plan for yourself that accommodates what you'll study, when, how and with whom.

Effective revision planning should take in to account the following:

- Your revision timetable. This could be a simple paper timetable that you create for yourself, or you might use a digital calendar on your phone or another device. Alternatively, the website *GetRevising*⁵ has a free, interactive study planner⁵ that is available for students to use.
- The content that you will revise. This might include dedicating additional time to revising content that you are less confident with.
- Time for regular breaks and social activities. Research suggests that frequent, shorter periods of revision are better for learning than sustained, extended periods; for instance, six one-hour periods of revision spread out over a few days will be better for learning than one sustained six-hour period of revision.
- Time to attempt practice exam papers, under exam conditions.

If you're struggling with your studies

If your ability to manage your studies is being impacted by extenuating circumstances (such as personal difficulties) then rest assured that we can help. The Queen Mary Advice and Counselling Service is on hand to provide guidance and support across a number of issues and challenges, so you can get back on track.

Effective revision techniques

There are many techniques that students use to aid their revision - you may already have some that you know work well for you.

The revision techniques that you employ should align with how you learn best. Using a mixture of techniques can also support you with revising different types of content, or merely to help keep things more interesting for yourself.

Some effective revision techniques include:

- **Creating mind maps** - using drawings and colour often helps you to process information and remember it better
- **Using flash cards** - they can be a really useful way of learning small chunks of information, particularly formulae, equations or vocabulary
- **Attempting practice exam papers** - practising real past exam questions is a good way to test yourself and get an insight into what the exam will be like
- **Watching videos** - there are some great videos online where different topics are covered in a fun way, to help you remember the material
- **Making notes** - it can be useful to revise your notes, and then go through and condense them further so you have a helpful summary of each topic
- **Quizzes** - you can create your own quiz, or use sites like *Quizlet*⁶ to see if there is a quiz on the topic you are revising
- **Teaching others** - one of the best ways to assess your own learning is if you are able to teach the topic to others

Pages 5-10 of *The OCR Guide to Revision*⁷ also contain an excellent list of different revision techniques, with a focus on 'how to engage your memory'.



2. Skills Audit

Now that you have had an opportunity to investigate some important academic skills in detail, you can reflect on your own set of skills, including areas in which you are particularly strong, and areas in which further development is required.

To begin with, give yourself a score from 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong) for each of the skills in the below table. Mark your score with an 'x'. If necessary, you can re-visit the relevant sections in this guide that are related to each skill, to help you identify your score in each area.

Study Skill	Very weak									Very strong
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Critical Thinking										
Time Management										
Note taking										
Essay Writing										
Revision										
Researching										
Concentrating										
Presenting										
Listening										

3. Skill Development Plan

Use your Skills Audit to complete the below tables for the skills that you scored weakest in. In particular, think carefully about:

- **The steps** you will take to improve – try and be specific about what actions you will take to improve in the area you identify.
- **By when** you will take the steps you identify for yourself. Set yourself realistic deadlines.
- **How you will measure** your improvement – use the hints below to help you with this.

Skill 1	
Skill identified for improvement	
Steps identified to improve this skill	
By when will I have taken the above steps?	
How will I measure the improvement?	

Skill 2	
Skill identified for improvement	
Steps identified to improve this skill	
By when will I have taken the above steps?	
How will I measure the improvement?	

Skill 3	
Skill identified for improvement	
Steps identified to improve this skill	
By when will I have taken the above steps?	
How will I measure the improvement?	

Suggestions for how to measure improvement:

- Ask for feedback
- Test yourself
- Compare (before vs. after)
- Assessed work
- Level of confidence

4. You and your learning

A combination of factors can influence how effective your learning is, such as the environment you learn in, the learning techniques you employ, the quality of your learning resources and finding the right balance of work and relaxation.

As you move through this next section of the guide you will explore some helpful theory and practical advice, to support you with your learning.

4.1 What sort of learner are you?

Different people learn in different ways. It can be particularly helpful to have an understanding of the 'type' of learner you are to ensure that your learning is as meaningful as possible.

Research suggests that peoples' learning styles fall in to between four and eight main categories. If you aren't already aware of your learning style then there are short questionnaires⁸ that you can complete to give you an indication of this.

Four common learning styles can be characterised as follows:

Auditory

Auditory learners prefer to learn when information is heard or spoken. They benefit from strategies that involve talking things through.

Some suggested approaches for auditory learners are:

- Listening
- Speaking
- Having group discussions
- Using verbal repetition
- Using sound recordings
- Using mnemonic devices

Kinaesthetic (Hands-on)

Kinaesthetic learners prefer to learn through touch and movement. They favour having tactile experiences and carrying out physical activities to practice applying new information.

Some suggested approaches for kinaesthetic learners are:

- Using models and materials
- Having physical interactions
- Using hands-on approaches
- Using experiences and practicing

Reader / Writer

Reader/writer learners prefer information to be presented using words and statements.

Some suggested approaches for learners who favour reading and writing are:

- Reading
- Writing
- Making detailed notes
- Re-writing notes to revise
- Viewing information in word form

Visual

Visual learners prefer to learn by sight, using images to understand concepts and ideas.

Some suggested approaches for visual learners are :

- Using images and diagrams
- Using graphics and visuals
- Using charts and maps
- Using mind maps
- Using flash cards

4.2 Maximising your Learning

In their guide for pre-university students, *Know before you Go*⁹, the mental health charity Student Minds has worked with partners in the higher education community to produce a set of study tips for students, to help them make their learning as meaningful as possible.

Some of them are as follows:

Reduce your stress levels If you start to feel stressed, taking a few deep breaths can help you relax. Exercise and good time management can also help. And, remember that the stress feeling is there to encourage you to study!	Get enough sleep Your studying will be much less effective if you are tired. Try to get a good night's sleep or take a nap (20-30 minutes) if you are tired.	Be careful with caffeine Too much caffeine can increase feelings of anxiety and restlessness. However, caffeine in moderation can be helpful (just know your limits).
Study in a group Sometimes studying with your classmates can help with areas you find difficult. Studying in this way may be particularly helpful for auditory learners.	Don't procrastinate This may lead to cramming and that does not help. However, some people study best under stress. And they procrastinate as a way to get into their optimal study zone. Know your study sweet spot!	Quiz yourself Use chapter review questions to reinforce what you know and determine what you need to review.
Highlight key points This can help you recognise the most important parts and can help you with a last minute review.	Take scheduled breaks Commit to taking a break from studying at regular intervals. Sometimes walking away for a few minutes can be refreshing.	Avoid distractions Study where you will not be distracted. Remember TV and your phone count as distractions!

4.3 Your golden rules for learning

Create your three golden rules that will help you to maximise your learning based on the information contained in this guide, including knowledge of your individual learning style and the suggested study tips.

These rules can be a mixture of things you should always ensure you do when you are studying, things you should always avoid, and strategies you can use to help you when you start to feel a certain way whilst you are studying.

Some (optional) sentence starters that may help you to create your three golden rules are below.

- o I learn best when ...
- o My learning style is ... and as a result, I should ...
- o Things I should always do when studying are ...
- o Things I should always avoid when studying are ...
- o When I start to feel ... I should try to ...
- o To minimise distractions, I should ...

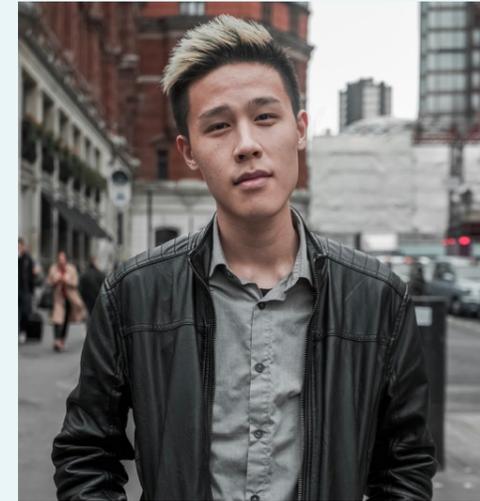
My Golden Rules for Learning

Golden rule 1	
Golden rule 2	
Golden rule 3	



John's 3 golden rules for exam success – 'The 3 Cs'

Queen Mary student John, who is in his second year studying Business Management, shares his top study tips for exam success – his '3 Cs'.



You can watch John's short video, '3 simple steps to prepare for your exams', on [Queen Mary's YouTube channel](#).

1. Calmness

"If you're anxious, don't worry...I'm sure you've gotten this far in life doing plenty of exams. Find out what calms you down the most, and do it."

2. Control

"Know yourself – when you study best, in what environment and using what study methods. All these things play a very big role in how you can make the most out of your time."

3. Confidence

"To build confidence, try to surround yourself with people doing the same subject as you who are positive. That way, things can be less stressful, and you can all get through the process together."



5. Helpful Study Skills Resources

Some additional study skills resources that students may find useful include:

Academic Study Skills - <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/outreach/hub/academic-study-skills>

An online course provided by Queen Mary University of London, to support students to identify and develop the skills needed for university-level study.

Realising Opportunities study skills guide - [http://www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk/_assets/img/Revision-Materials\(1\).pdf](http://www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk/_assets/img/Revision-Materials(1).pdf)

A collection of high quality study skills resources, brought together in to one place.

The OCR Guide to Revision - <https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/295221-the-ocr-guide-to-revision.pdf>

A guide that focuses on general revision skills and techniques to consolidate students' learning and help them prepare for assessments.

MyStudyLife - <https://www.mystudylife.com/>

An app and website that supports students with planning their overall study schedule.

Hold - <https://www.hold.app/>

An app that rewards uninterrupted study time, available for Android and iOS devices.

6. References

¹ Learnhigher model for critical thinking:

http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/Model_To_Generate_Critical_Thinking1.pdf

^{2 3 4} UCAS and NEC study skills guides:

<https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/student-life/study-skills-guides>

⁵ GetRevising study planner:

<https://getrevising.co.uk/planner>

⁶ Quizlet:

<https://www.quizlet.com/en-gb>

⁷ The OCR guide to revision:

<https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/295221-the-ocr-guide-to-revision.pdf>

⁸ Learning styles questionnaire example:

<https://www.quizony.com/what-kind-of-learner-are-you/>

⁹ Student Minds 'Know before you Go' guide:

http://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/180531_kbyg_interactive.pdf



UK Student Recruitment
and Widening Participation
Queen Mary University of London
Tel: +44 (0)20 7882 3064
email: education-liaison@qmul.ac.uk

 @qmul

 @qmul

 officialqmul

qmul.ac.uk

If you require this publication in a different accessible format we will endeavour to provide this, where possible. For further information and assistance, please contact: designandbranding@qmul.ac.uk