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## NOTE MAKING AND STUDY TIPS

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### Aims

This chapter focuses on how to make notes and how to use these to aid your study. You may use a slightly different approach depending on whether you are in a lecture, studying from books and journal articles, or have a disability. You may modify your approach based on your particular learning style and there are also additional factors to consider if you are doing your degree via distance education as many of the situations and cues available to full-time and part-time students are not there for you. By the end of this chapter you should know:

- how to make notes (rather than take notes) from various sources
- how to condense your notes to form a valuable study aid
- how to identify and make best use of your particular learning style
- some of the factors that influence your motivation
- some additional tips for studying via distance education
- how to search for psychology articles online.

### What is expected at university?

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I am sure that you already know that university is very different from secondary school and in many ways. Classes can be considerably bigger and you might find yourself in a lecture hall with anywhere between 20 to 500 other students, depending on the subject. There is usually little or no individual attention from teaching staff and you could complete your degree studies with some of your lecturers not even knowing your name or realising that you are a student in their department. Some staff may have designated hours in which you can come and talk to them, usually by appointment only, but there is considerably more work involved in being a university lecturer than you may be aware of and so many will not have the time to deal with students outside of class contact hours. You might have the chance to work in small teaching groups of two to 12 students and one staff member, depending on the university in which you are studying, but this may be for just an hour every two weeks. You may find that your lecture, tutorial and lab timetable contains very few class contact hours and that you may even have one or two days in a week

on which you do not have any classes at all. But please do not make the mistake of thinking that you have little work to do and tons of free time. For every hour of class time that is scheduled you will have to do several hours of independent study and work. Take this into consideration if you are looking for a part-time job during the academic year, as 'I had to work' is usually not regarded as a valid excuse for failure to submit work on time or to prepare material for a tutorial. You should also not look for part-time work until after the first couple of weeks of the academic term as tutorials may not be scheduled until then and some class times may change.

When it comes to studying you may find that setting up and working in a small study group (no more than six people) helps you or you may prefer to work alone; this is entirely up to you. What you should not forget, however, is that at university you are pretty much on your own when it comes to studying and learning. Guidelines always suggest that you study for several hours every day though the reality is that this is not always possible. It is important that you do your best to keep up with the work so that you will not fall behind or find yourself under greater pressure when it comes to exam time. If an hour or two a day is enough for you to manage this then that is fine, but you may find that an average of 4–6 hours a day will be necessary. Pace yourself and try to make your study time as effective as possible; quality is better than quantity. All too often our study techniques are inefficient and we spend too much time on tasks that are not particularly valuable or we allow ourselves to drift easily into daydreaming. If you follow the guidelines presented here then you may find that you can cover a lot of work in a shorter period of time than you may have required before now.

You may be lucky enough to have a good class or set of tutorials on study and essay skills, but it is also possible that the teaching in that area may consist of just a handout with instructions of 'This is self-explanatory so off you go'. In my first undergraduate year everyone was in the dark as there was no guidance whatsoever on essay writing or study skills and the phrase 'critical evaluation' never cropped up. A handout with a spider diagram of study plans or an essay structure, which is what I received in my second year, may provide a picture of what you are advised to do but the only way to *learn* that task is through practical experience with feedback. At university you are expected to organise your own study time, and it is your own responsibility to turn up for class, to do your assignments, to prepare for exams, and to learn. Lecturers and tutors will facilitate this by giving classes and advising on reading lists, but while some will give further assistance to students it is not their job to work with you on a one-to-one level. It is important, therefore, that you adopt a study method that suits you and that works well for you and a major part of this is in developing a good note-making system.

### **'Do we have to take notes in this class?'**

During my first year of teaching a student arrived one day about 10 minutes after the class had started. Rather than slink in quietly and take a seat at the back of the room she made a rather noisy entrance, flopped into a seat in the front of the room

and took a couple of minutes to get herself organised. After another few minutes had passed she put up her hand and asked 'Do we have to take notes in this class?' As I politely indicated that morning, it is not a requirement that you ever take notes in class as this is something that is entirely up to you. Many people do like to take notes, or will feel obliged to do so, while others will prefer to sit quietly and listen closely to what is being said and then work later from the slides and required readings. However, it is a very good idea that you do make notes at your lectures and classes as you will not remember most of what is said, no matter how good a memory you think you have. That student of many years ago chose to put her head down and go to sleep, which made me wonder why she had bothered to come at all. This was not a good first impression to make and not how you want your lecturers to recognise or remember you. Making notes during lectures has several benefits:

- it makes you pay attention to what is going on
- it will help you to remember aspects of the lecture when you go back through them later that day
- the notes will be written down in the order in which the points were raised in the lecture so there will be a structure that will guide you in your reading
- you will have made a head-start on compiling your notes when you sit down to study the topic yourself.

### Note making versus note taking

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You may wonder what the difference is between note making and note taking or be surprised that I'm saying that there *is* a difference between the two terms. The major difference is that note making is an active process while note taking is a passive one. You have to think and understand if you are going to engage in note making as you are identifying and making note of the key points. This helps you to learn the material more quickly and also to remember it better. As a result, a good set of notes can reduce the study time needed in preparation for exams. However, if you are just note taking then little thought or understanding is required as you are just copying stuff down as it is. You may think that you'll just write it down now and probably understand it later on in the year but quite often it doesn't work that way. Instead you will look back at your notes later in the year and then realise that either you still do not understand what it was all about, that you have little or no recollection of having written any of it, or that you cannot find the information that you want.

You may already have developed an effective note-making strategy, depending on the subjects you have studied in the past. If you have done so then congratulations, you are likely to adapt quickly to studying and working at university. You are used to thinking about the material that you are hearing or reading, identifying the key points and sources, and then jotting them down in your own words and with the appropriate citations added. Your notes will probably be in a clear format that you can follow easily, they are likely to be well-structured and well-organised, thereby making it easy to find the information that you are looking for at a later date. Good notes will also enable you to identify, further on in the year, those extra points of

material that you could include on a topic in order to develop your knowledge and perform better in the exams.

If your method of study has involved note taking then you should modify it for university. The time to start learning the material that is in your notes is while you are making them. But if you are just taking down information without thinking about it and without making a concerted effort to understand and remember it, then you are not engaging actively with the content. I know that when you are new to a subject you may feel that you do not know enough yet to determine what is important and what is not. After all, the person who wrote the book that you are studying for your class must have felt that all of the information was of sufficient importance to be included. Indeed, this is true. However, you will not be writing a book for your classes but essays (see Chapter 4), reports (see Chapter 8) and exam answers (see Chapter 6). These will typically be in the region of 1000 to 5000 words and so you will need to be able to get straight to the point. If you have identified the key points in your reading and made notes on them then you will be more likely to remember the material the next time you view it. I will talk about how to do this below. It is also a very good idea that you organise your notes and that you keep them for future years as material that you covered in first year will crop up again in subsequent years of your degree. After that you may be tutoring as a post-graduate student and being able to refer back to your undergraduate notes can be a great help. All too often I hear of students throwing out all their notes and selling their books at the end of each year and that is a pity. I understand that if you need the money you may need to sell your books but if you can hold on to them then do so, at least until you finish your degree. You will often find them a handy resource or refresher course when taking more advanced modules later in your degree and also a valuable aid if you become a tutor as a postgraduate.

## Lectures and classes

It is essential that you attend your scheduled lectures and classes as these will highlight the key points to be considered in the topics that are being presented and they will also offer guidance as to some of the academic sources you can read for further information. Individual lecturers might also give hints as to the topics that may come up on the exams or stress a specific angle that you should consider. If you do not attend the class then you will miss this. Yes, many lecturers do put up a copy of their slides on the local university network, if this facility is available in your university, but you should not try to rely on these. Many of the slides will contain just brief bullet points, some of which are just a single word or term; they are very brief notes. However, unless you know the context into which they can be placed, what the different terms mean, and have enough information so you could talk briefly about each one if asked to do so, then just the lecturer's bullet points will not be sufficient to work from as your only lecture notes. If you were not at the lecture you will miss this and as everyone has their own way of making notes and often their own shorthand style of writing at speed (abbreviate words, don't write them in full),

you should not rely on using a classmate's notes. Can you be sure that they did not miss key information, that they took stuff down correctly, or that you will even be able to read what they wrote?

If the slides are to be made available to students this will usually be in the hours or days *after* the lecture. Some lecturers will make their slides available in advance but many will not. This may be to discourage students from making the mistake of thinking that once they have the slides they do not need to attend the lecture, but it may also be because the lecturer is finishing or amending the slides until the night before the class. Psychology is a dynamic subject and a good lecturer will always make sure that their lectures are up to date. If you are dyslexic, legally blind, or have another disability then you may be entitled to receive a copy of the slides before the class, even if they are not being made generally available until afterwards. Talk to your disability services contact as well as the lecturer. If you are to receive an advance copy then it is most likely that the slides (usually a PowerPoint presentation) will be emailed to you so that you can print them out.

If you are just trying to write down everything that the lecturer says or has on their slides then you are taking notes rather than making notes. This is a passive process in which you can almost engage in automatic pilot mode. Why? It does not require thought and indeed it is possible to drift off slightly into daydreaming mode while doing this. Yes you will have to be listening to what the lecturer is saying if you are going to write it down, but if you are worried about what word follows the previous one then you are not actively listening to the content and context of what is being said. If you are not actively thinking about what it is that you are doing then you may find yourself looking back at your notes and asking yourself 'What on earth is all this about?' Many students will find that in first year, or even in all the years of their degree, they feel that they have to write everything down, despite knowing the difference between making and taking notes. It requires a certain degree of confidence to listen carefully and just jot down key points and key ideas, noting any references or citations that were mentioned in the lecture. A lot of the information will be on the slides, in some form or other, but many lecturers will also include a lot more information in their talk than appears on the screen.

If you have a question during the lecture you should make a note of it but also wait – do not interrupt the speaker! The answer may be on the next slide or about to be presented in the next few minutes. Many lecturers will pause at various points during the class to ask if there are any questions on one part before moving on to the next but others will only take questions at the end of the class; these times are when you should speak up. You may ask yourself 'What is the harm in asking a question in a class?' However, often it is not just one question as other students will take the opportunity to jump in with their queries too, often ones that would have been answered by just waiting for a few more minutes. If one question triggers a flood or if one or more people keep interrupting every few minutes then there may not be time to complete the lecture. Unlike in school we do not pick up where we left off at the next class, which may not be for another week. Instead we just move on to the next topic as time is limited and there is a considerable amount of information

to be covered. If it's been covered in the slides, even if interruptions prevented the material from being discussed in class, then it still has the potential to appear on the exam, along with any recommended or required readings.

### Writing notes in class

So how would you go about making notes at a lecture? The first thing to remember is that there will be at least one chapter of the required textbook that is associated with the class so all the detail that you need to get you started will be in that. You will usually know in advance what topic is to be covered in the lecture so it is a good idea to have read the chapter before attending. The lecturer will show slides and if you are going to be able to get a copy of them later then there is no point in writing down anything that is on them. Instead you can jot down the gist of what that lecturer said while slide 1 was up, then slide 2, slide 3 and so on. As I've already said, there will often be information that the lecturer will give that is not on the slides. So if you listen to her/him and note what they stressed or what was said that was not on the slide, then you have obtained extra detail that you would otherwise have missed. This might have been merely a digression but it could also have been something very important, an additional reading or way of thinking about the topic or perhaps a hint that this particular topic would make a nice exam question and if it was to appear on the paper in May then here is an example of what might be asked. If a lecturer does give such a hint they are *not* giving you the actual exam question so do not make a fuss because it did not appear on the paper. However, some lecturers will do this to stimulate your thinking as to how you might approach a topic. I have often done this in lectures, occasionally offering two or three different suggestions as to how a topic might be approached in an exam (I will not put these on slides so if you're not there you miss out), and I have noticed three different ways in which students respond. Some are so focused on writing down what is on the slides that they probably did not hear me; certainly they show no sign of having heard what I said. Others nod and smile but do not write anything down; most of them are unlikely to remember it later. Then there is the third group who nod and smile while making a note of what I have said and mark it NB or highlight it or make some other notation in the margin. Some of that latter group have commented, after their exams, that they found the suggested possible questions given during the lectures to have been very useful when they were studying the topic later.

To summarise, here is the suggested approach to note making in lectures and classes, presuming that you will have access to a copy of the slides afterwards:

- write down the name of the topic and the date (for ease of filing)
- note the chapter(s) associated with the topic
- speed-read each slide as it is projected to get a gist of the key terms
- do not copy down what is on the slides as you will have them later
- listen carefully to what the lecturer is saying and associate it with each individual slide. For example, you could write (1), to indicate that this was the first slide, and then jot down a few key points that the lecturer made.

Ideally you should review your lecture notes later the same day while the class is still fairly fresh in your mind. Go through each slide and read the associated piece of the chapter in your textbook. Then produce an expanded set of notes based on the combination of lecture notes, slides and textbook. Some people like to draw a line down the centre of the page while making notes in a lecture, writing on one side of the line only and then using the space on the other side to add in the additional info later. My personal preference was always to redo the notes later and type them up. I would do this because my handwriting is quite large and I would find it very messy and unclear if I tried to squash all the extra material into such a small space. By typing up the combined notes later it also meant that I could print out multiple copies so that I could easily add the notes from one lecture to the file for another class that touched on the same topic. Another benefit to having typed up the notes was that I could easily add in extra information at any time without having to squash it in somewhere or draw arrows leading to boxes or having to rewrite the whole page or tack it on out of sequence. Only you can know what will work for you but do give it some thought and see if you can improve on the method that you have been using up to now.

### Recording lectures

Some people like to record a lecture so that they can listen to it again later but if you are considering doing this then be honest with yourself; are you really going to sit down somewhere and listen to the whole thing again and make notes this time around? Where would you plan on doing this? You cannot do it in the library as you will be disturbing other readers and many university libraries have strict policies about the use of mp3 players or other devices. By the time that you get home for the evening you are likely to be tired or have a lot of reading to do or maybe an essay to finish, so are you really going to take the time to replay the lecture? If you are thinking about recording the lecture in order that you can make better notes later then I would recommend against it as your time would be better spent reading the textbooks and the additional academic sources that will further your knowledge of the topic. If you are planning to record lectures because you have a disability that makes it difficult for you either to get to the lectures or to be able to make notes during them, then by all means record the class but you should also have somebody make notes for you. If you contact your university's disability services then they can usually arrange this. But whatever your reason for choosing to record the class it is important that you ask the lecturer's permission to do so; most will not have a problem with this.

Some universities now offer podcasts of lectures but you should not presume that your classes will be included in this, or if they are, then you should not rely on these instead of going to the lecture. These are useful if you missed the class because you genuinely could not be there but they are not a reason not to attend. Indeed if nobody was to turn up for the class because they all decided to download the podcast later, then there would be no class and everyone loses. By all means do make use of the podcast system if it is available to you but, as I asked with regard to

recording of the class, are you really going to have the time, or be able to take the time, to listen to it by yourself and make your notes then?

### Other methods – if you cannot write for the duration

Most people will choose to write their notes by hand in a lecture and, indeed, most students will do this automatically. But not everybody is able to write notes during class, and I do not mean that they just do not know how to do so. There are many students who have disabilities, visible or hidden, that make it physically difficult or impossible to scribble notes for the duration of a lecture. Maybe you have arthritis or carpal tunnel, for example, or you have another type of deformation or injury to the structure of your hand or fingers that makes it difficult for you to hold a pen or to write for extended periods. Perhaps your writing hand is in plaster or you have a prosthesis and you are not very adept at writing with your other hand. Or maybe you've had an accident and broken both of your arms; this has happened! If this is something that is permanent or is going to be problematic by exam time, then do contact your university's disability services immediately to arrange exam accommodations or any assistance that may be available to help you with lectures or in libraries on campus. If the problem is not something that will require assistance in lectures, even though you may require accommodations for exams, then there are some strategies that you can try for making notes in lectures. There may be other ideas that you can think of, or your university's disability services may have some alternatives for you, but these are ones that I and others I know have tried and tested.

- Speak to your lecturers before your first class with them. Tell them that you have a difficulty and ask if you may have a copy of their slides in advance, even on the morning of the lecture (in case they are editing or finalising them the night before). Jot down bullet points on the printed copy of the slides.
- Bring your copy of the textbook with you, turn to the chapter that is associated with the lecture, and highlight the terms or points that the lecturer covers in the class. Jot down any terms that appear to be extra, or that you cannot find at that moment, and also note any suggestions that the lecturer may make about additional reading or potential exam questions.
- If you have a laptop bring it with you but make sure that the battery is fully charged (there may not be any power sockets available to you) and that you have the volume muted; bleeps, boings, quacks and other noises will not be appreciated during the lecture. It is also extremely rude if you surf the web or check your email during class and it is most definitely not appreciated if you surf in order to find 'helpful bits and pieces' to share with the lecturer during the class or to find the answers to questions that are posed to stimulate thought before the next point is made! So if you are going to use a laptop in a lecture it must be quiet and used only for typing your notes.

If you have a desktop computer at home or in your accommodation but you do not have a laptop then there is a comparatively inexpensive alternative. Get a PDA, for example a Palm Vx or more recent model (new or secondhand), for which word processing software and a separate qwerty keyboard are available (they usually have to be bought separately). Make sure that your PDA is fully charged, attach it to the keyboard, and hey presto – a cheap laptop that folds up and fits in your pocket! When you get home you can synchronise your PDA with your computer and it will copy all of your notes on to the desktop. Sometimes this software will



- also include a PDF reader and so you can download journal articles or book chapters onto your desktop, save them onto your PDA, and then take them with you to read anywhere – very handy if you are not able to carry books or bundles of articles around with you. Some mobile phones will also have these functions but the tiny keys make it difficult to build up speed (particularly if you have a problem with your hands) and, also, you will have to sit at the front of the lecture hall and let the lecturer know what you are doing so that neither s/he or your classmates think that you are just being rude and texting in class.
- Another strategy that minimises the strain on your hands is to use only bullet points. Just listing them in the order in which they cropped up can lead to confusion when you read back over them later, as they will lack context and they may create the false impression of there being a linear dimension to the material. However, if you use something like a spider diagram/mind map/flow chart type of structure it will help. This does not have to be in any particular formal style, just whatever helps you. Some students to whom I have spoken have said that they prefer to use their own structure, as applying the more formal styles leave them trying to remember how to lay them out rather than concentrating on the content of the lecture. You might simply put a heading at the top of the page and then create a box around each group of terms or points that related to a slide but were not on it, effectively making up a second batch of slides. Or you might choose to put the name of the topic in a circle in the middle of the page and draw lines from this to other bubbles in which you will put key terms, citations or points or headings, with more bubbles extending from them. This way, when the lecturer mentions something that applies to a point that was made earlier in the lecture, you can just add it to that box or bubble. This type of approach can also be very effective as a revision tool for exams as you can condense a lot of information into a single sheet (see the NETTACT approach below).

## Books and journals

There will almost certainly be a specific textbook that you will be expected to work from for each subject and this will be an excellent place for you to begin your study. But introductory textbooks are only the starting point; unlike like many school subjects they do not represent the sum total of what you are supposed to know. Read similar chapters from other textbooks (this also helps you to become more familiar with the basics while not having to reread the same chapter over and over, which can get rather boring or lead to a false sense of knowing the material when you are only recognising that you have read it before) and also some journal articles so that you can broaden your knowledge. There is a lot of reading that we are supposed to do as students and sometimes we may feel that time is of the essence so we should just get stuck in to writing notes from page one of the document. However, arguably the most effective way to study a chapter or article is to use what Rowntree (1976) called the SQ3R approach. The steps are as follows:

- 1 Survey:** Skim through the chapter or article to get a sense of what it is about. Do not write anything down at this stage. Look at headings, the introduction (which may include the stated aims or findings), and the summary. If the chapter has glossary items at the end of it then have a look at these to get an idea of the terminology that is going to appear.
- 2 Question:** Ask yourself some questions about the document and jot these down. What do you think it is going to be about? Does it sound like it is going to be useful or relevant to what you

are supposed to be studying? What sort of things might it talk about? What questions pop into your mind when you look at the title, headings, introduction and glossary?

- 3 Read:** Read through the document, quickly but attentively, but do not write anything. You want to get a sense of what it is about and you may decide to read it through two or three times.
- 4 Recall:** Jot down what you can remember. What were the key points or arguments that were presented in the chapter and how were they demonstrated? Were there any major studies, models or theories discussed? Were there any major figures in psychology discussed? Did the same author crop up several times in the citations?
- 6 Review:** Repeat the first three steps to make sure that you have not left out anything important and that you have recalled the material correctly. It is at this stage that you can tidy up your notes or put a final structure on them.

It is very important that you add citations to your notes. What sources did you use? What book or article made the statement or argued the point? Whose theory or model is it? You may have written your notes in your own words but these are not your own ideas; you are merely noting your understanding or somebody else's work and you *must* credit that work. If you have included a direct quotation from a source in your notes then you must also make a note of the page number from which it came. For example, if you made a note that I said 'It is very important that you add citations to your notes' you would have to make a note that this quotation came from McGee, S. (2010). *Key Research and Study Skills in Psychology*. London: SAGE. page (insert number here). If using this citation in an essay or report you would put the quotation between inverted commas, put (McGee, 2010, p. insert number) in the main body of the text and the full citation in the references section at the end of your document. If you do not provide full citations in your assignments then you may find yourself being penalised for plagiarism and that could lead to a fail grade. See Chapter 4 for details on how you should lay out your references and for information about plagiarism.

### The 6 W's model

Many students have expressed their concern that they do not know how to identify what is important to include in their note and what information they could leave out. You will find that avoiding the trap of getting dogged down under the tyranny of information becomes an easier decision to make as you move into the later stages of your degree. However, I always give the following tip as a quick guide to help students develop that skill; I call it The 6 W's. Ask yourself these six questions and seek quick answers to them every time you want to make notes, analyse an academic source (see Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion), study, or write an essay, lab report or exam answer.

- **WHOSE:** theory, model, approach, or research are you examining?
- **WHAT:** is it about, what does it say, what does it mean, suggest, or imply?
- **WHEN:** was the theory, model or approach developed, when was the research conducted?
- **WHERE:** was the work developed, conducted, and/or published?

- **WHICH:** methods were employed in recruiting participants, in designing the model, questionnaire(s) or study, in conducting the work, and in analysing the data?
- **WHY:** is this theory, model, approach, or research important and why have other academics commented on it or used it in their own work?

## Condensing your notes

If you have been making notes throughout the year then you will find that by the time it comes to the exams you have a lot of paper to go through. You might decide to prepare six topics for the exam on one subject but have got about a lever-arch folder's worth of notes. Some of the information contained within this folder will be 'old news' at this stage of the year, things that you wrote down as you encountered them for the first time but which are now redundant because you have become so familiar with these. If you were really enthusiastic and read loads of articles and books then you might have a great deal of information on some points but you will not be able to cover it all in the exam. You may have to be selective and put aside some of the details that you have gathered but with practice you can condense all of your information so that you have just a single A4 page for each topic; a good friend of mine can condense a topic onto a single small filing card! You may already be familiar with this strategy or perhaps you are thinking wow, there's no way I could condense a whole folder down into a few pages! The process of doing this may take you anything from several hours to a few weeks to complete, depending on the amount of information that you have collected and how much of it you already know. Here is my suggestion as to how you can go about doing condensing

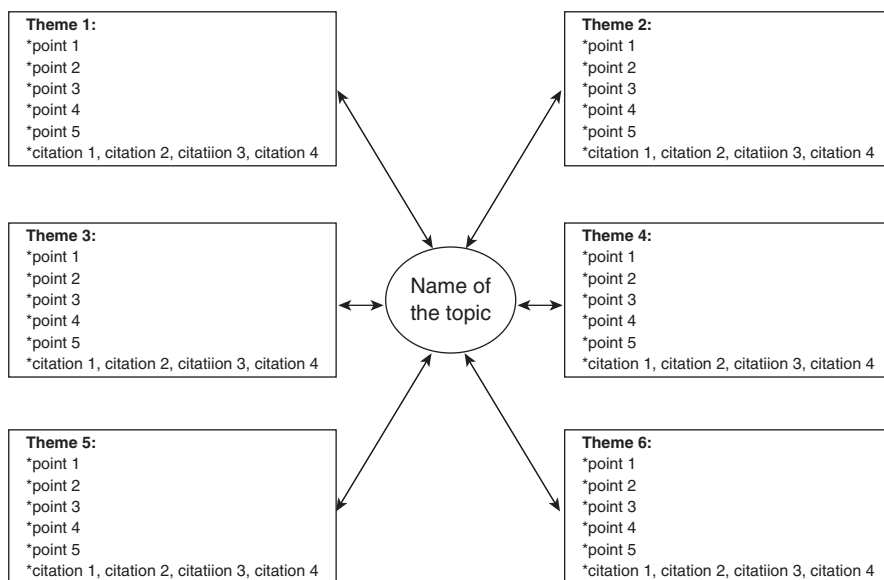


Figure 2.1 This shows how your final one-page study sheet might be structured if working with the NETTACT approach (you would have one of these sheets for each topic that you plan to cover for the exams)

your notes to a single page per topic and then how to make use of this valuable study aid (the NETTACT approach):

### Box 2.1: The NETTACT approach

- 1 Notes:** Collate all your notes on a single topic.
- 2 Exam papers:** Collate all recent exam questions on that topic from both main exams and the repeat papers (also called supplemental exams).
- 3 Themes in the exams:** Identify the themes (contexts, buzz words) that appear in the past questions and how these themes are examined (see Chapter 6).
- 4 Themes in the course:** Go back to your lecture notes on the topic and the chapter in the main textbook and identify the themes that were covered and, if applicable, the angle that was taken or stressed in discussing them (particularly important with regard to the lecture notes!).
- 5 Association of ideas:** Go back through your notes and associate the points, studies, citations, etc. with each of the individual themes. Make new and brief notes (bullet points) with each theme on a separate page. If you find that you have very little to put on any page then do the additional research now!
- 6 Chart your notes:** Take a single sheet of paper and put the name of the main topic in a circle in the middle. If you identified six different themes, for example, then draw six lines extending from the circle and put a box at the end each line (see Figure 2.1). In this box write the name of the theme and, very briefly, add the key points that relate to that it and in an order that would be appropriate for answering an essay question on the topic. For studies just put in the citation and no other details; these are in your longer thematic notes.
- 7 Talk about them:** This chart is your study page and you should take a few minutes, on a frequent basis or every day during the exam season, to go over the sheet and see if you can talk about each one of the bullet points that you have written there. What do they mean? How do they relate to the theme? How would you define the key terms? What are the theories or models about? How do they look (if they have diagrams in your original notes)? What are the studies you have cited here actually about? What are the key arguments and supporting evidence? If you do this frequently then you will become very familiar with the content and while you are talking about the various points (alone and either out loud or to yourself) you may find that ideas, practical applications, links to other topics on your courses, or on sudden understanding of something that was a little hazy may all come to you. If so you can make the necessary addition to your study page. Whenever you get stuck then refer back to your thematic notes but the idea is that you are engaging in active processing of the material and with as few cues as possible; this helps with recall in the exam. You may also find in the exam that you can almost visualise your study sheet and you might decide, after breaking down the exam question (see Chapter 6), to jot down what you can remember of the relevant part of your chart as rough work.

## Learning styles

There are many different theories of learning and models of the different ways in which people learn, but to go into them here would be an unnecessary digression as the focus of this book is on giving you tips on how to do stuff in a practical way rather than presenting an overview of the various academic theories that try to explain what it is that you are doing. In a nutshell, there are four basic styles by which we study and learn and different people will be more effective at different ones. These styles are by seeing, hearing, reading and writing, and doing, or as described by Fleming and Mills (1992), these are visual, aural, read/write, and kinaesthetic (VARK).



Think about this for a moment. Which do you find the easiest approach to learning how to do something? Is it by seeing how it's done, hearing about how it's done, reading and writing about it, or by actually doing it?

If you think about this you will probably find that the answer is that it depends on the situation. For some tasks we need to see something being done in order to be able to do it ourselves. For other tasks it is enough to hear the information, maybe once or maybe many times, and we will have acquired the knowledge. Many tasks, however, require practice and direct hands-on experience to be able to master them but often we will use a combination of all three. Writing essays, analysing journal articles, and writing reports are three essential academic skills that almost always require the kinaesthetic approach; practice makes perfect. Well, at least practice makes for better performance.

### Visual

Material that is presented visually will include symbols, pictures, charts, graphs, and any other non-verbal visual techniques. My training on essay writing did not happen until the second year of my degree course and it was presented as a one-page handout that contained a diagram resembling a flow-chart and the verbal instruction 'That's all you need to know, just follow that and you'll be fine'. Somebody who has a very visual style of learning may have found this limited training to have been extremely effective. Even so, the likelihood is that even highly visual learners will need some more instruction than this for some tasks. You may see planes flying every day of the week but not have worked out how it is that they stay in the air. We tend to use a mixture of all four styles of learning to master some tasks and so combining elements of all of them can be effective as both a teaching tool and a study methodology. In my experience as a professional writer, student and teacher, written analyses and lab reports are two of the skills that most people seem to find require a combination of the read/write and kinaesthetic approaches to be able to go beyond the basics. When it comes to something like setting up a computer or

D.I.Y. then a visual approach may be very effective, as you may find that it helps to be able to see how something is done rather than to hear about it or to try to figure it out on your own.

If you can learn best through use of a visual style then you will probably find that it is easy to follow the various models that come up in psychology. You may also find it helpful, therefore, to apply colour or diagrammatic structures to your notes and so might use spider diagrams, mind mapping, flow charts or the NETTACT approach. You may even find that you can almost visualise where something is in your notes or a book as you try to recall the information, right down to the fact that the point you want is on the lower right-hand corner of page 17, beside the photograph of the child playing with the ball. If you can do this then make use of it and add visual components to your note making and studying. One visual technique that some students find to be particularly helpful is the ancient Method of Loci approach. This is where you choose a location, say a building that you know well, and then place the key pieces of information in specific places within it. For example, you might place the key components of a particular academic model spread out on the dining room table so that when you visualise that table you can also visualise the information sitting on top of it.

### Aural/auditory

Now that you are at university you may have had to move to a new town or city. Have you managed to find out where everything is yet? Have you succeeded in finding your way around the campus? If so, then how? Did you find your way by wandering around looking at road signs, street names and maps, and trying to build up a visual impression of the area, i.e. by applying a visual style of learning, or did you just ask for directions? Some people find that they will remember something much better if they can hear it being spoken aloud than if they just rely on looking or reading. If this is the case for you then you probably use a more auditory style of learning. Of course, as I've said, you probably use all three styles in different situations or even a combination of the three in any one setting. However, just as some people find that they cannot learn something through hearing it alone and that they must see it or do it, others will find that they absolutely must hear it aloud to be able to remember the information.

If you have a predominately auditory style then you may find that you will remember much more of what was actually said in a lecture than will other students who were more focused on reading the slides and making notes. You may find that the process of making notes in class is distracting and that you will learn more by listening intently and then making your notes later; I have come across several students who do this. You may also find it helpful to download podcasts of lectures, both from your own university and from other universities, or to record yourself reading the textbook, notes or articles and then to play them back from time to time. You might find that the more times you hear something the more likely you are to remember it, but that you could read something 100 times and never be able

to recall it as accurately. If this is you then you might also find that it helps to associate sounds with information, for example you might find it helpful to play a particular song or piece of music while studying the chapter on attitudes and then to imagine this tune playing when trying to recall the details. Just don't start singing, whistling or humming in the exam!

### Read/write

When I started in my first job I was handed a bunch of articles in a very particular format from a specialised field and told 'Read through those – that's what you'll be doing'. So ended my training-up on a task that was to form a major part of my job. My early attempts were rather stylised but with practice I found that I could inject my own flair into the required format. When I started university my training on writing lab reports was to sit in a room with about a dozen of my classmates and have someone fire a bunch of lab reports across the table and say 'Have a look through those – you'll have to write reports like that'. I noted the section headings but that was not enough to enable me to pick up on the nuances of report writing and to obtain first class honours on them (see Chapter 6). Many tasks can be learned quite well by utilising a read/write approach only, but to take some of them to the next level of expertise, for example essay writing, many of us will require the use of other styles too. A large proportion of the people in academia will have an effective read/write style of learning, a preference for dealing with information that is in the printed word.

If you have a mainly read/write learning style, on some or all types of tasks, then you may find it helpful to rewrite your notes many times, to write lots of sample essays or rough outlines to past and sample exam questions. You may find that your lectures or books on statistics are very confusing and that you can only come to grips with the material by doing the tests over and over again. If this is you then perhaps you should not submit the first finalised draft of your essays or reports but should aim to have those ready several days in advance so that you can fine-tune or even redo them. I know that many of us announce our good intentions of doing this anyway yet still manage to leave it until the last possible moment.

### Kinaesthetic

Practice, practice, practice. For many tasks in life we will learn through doing, whether it is a child learning how to tie a shoelace, a student learning how to write an academic essay, or a pilot learning to fly a jet. There are many tasks for which looking at diagrams, reading about how they are done, watching someone else doing them, or simply listening to the instructions will get us no further than a low to moderate level of performance. Many of these tasks are things that appear deceptively easy when we see them being performed or hear about what is involved. Yet when we try to do them ourselves we realise that there is so much more involved. Perhaps there are eye-hand co-ordination skills or cognitive skills or muscle development

required but which we do not yet possess. In all my years of teaching I have only encountered about three students who were able to produce a first-class essay at their first attempt, having just heard about how to do it and then followed my handouts (a combination of aural and read/write styles). For others learning to write a first-class essay was a process that required practice and the development of their skills through writing more and more essays and paying close attention to the feedback they received. The students who nailed it on the first attempt may have had extensive experience and practice of essay-writing before coming to study psychology at university although I know that for at least one of them this was not so; her aural and read/write learning skills were sufficiently good to produce the desired result in a single try. For most of us, however, we will develop our expertise at writing reports, analysing academic sources (see Chapter 3) and writing essays mostly through a combination of the aural, read/write, and kinaesthetic approaches.

## Motivation

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink. It's a cliché but it is very true and it also applies to studying. You have probably chosen to study psychology because it is something in which you have a great deal of interest so working up the motivation to study should be easy. Right? Not necessarily. Having a strong interest in the subject matter is a great place to start but we all have lots of other things going on in our lives that can divert or reduce our motivation. There are lots of academic theories about the subject of motivation but while they may be interesting they are not going to spur you into action when you really don't feel like writing that essay. What you need to do is to identify the things in your life that increase and decrease your motivation levels and then figure out how you can use that self-knowledge.



Think about this for a moment. What affects *your* motivation? Make a list of the things that improve and reduce your motivation and see if you can come up with any ideas about how to use this self-knowledge.

The following are some examples of things that students have identified as being likely to affect their motivation at any particular time. Some may be seemingly insurmountable hurdles but if we cannot get over these obstacles maybe we can find a way to go around them.

### *Decreased motivation:*

- tiredness
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- low self-esteem or confidence



- dislike of the task or subject
- dislike of the lecturer or tutor
- not really understanding the task or subject
- feeling overwhelmed by the workload
- feeling like we're missing out on something fun
- background noise (e.g. noisy neighbours or children)
- too hot or too cold
- lack of a sense of time pressure
- stress
- depression
- hormonal fluctuations
- illness
- pain
- relationship difficulties.

*Increased motivation:*

- good mood
- positive mental attitude
- fear of failure
- desire for success
- sense of achievement
- high self-esteem or confidence
- liking for the task or subject
- liking for the lecturer or tutor
- anticipation of a reward when it's finished
- desire to beat a fellow classmate
- music
- a sense of time pressure
- relaxed
- exercise
- talking to a friend
- chocolate.

Decreased motivation hits us all at some time or another and sometimes it can be so strong that it is almost paralysing. You feel as though you can't do anything and that you are ambivalent about the task that has to be done; you really want to get it finished but at the same time you never want to look at it again. There are many factors that can reduce motivation and some of them are things that we just have to ride out. Most of them, however, are things that make us procrastinate about doing something and we can deal with this if we want to. The trick can be to find something that will boost your mood and also, though not necessarily, your motivation for the undesired task. Maybe sitting in a particular chair helps you or listening to a particular piece of music. Maybe burning incense or scented candles works for you, or perhaps wearing a particular item of clothing, going for a run, or watching a favourite television programme. Promise yourself a reward for when you finish the task. Do what works for you, even if you have no idea as to why it is that it helps; the why is not important.

## Distance education

Most guides to studying are written with the apparent assumption that all students are full-time, or perhaps part-time night students, who attend regular lectures and have easy access to a variety of facilities, including libraries or computer labs. But there are also thousands of students who are working on their qualifications via distance education and this presents different challenges. A distance education student does not have lectures, coffee breaks with classmates, long hours to spend in the university library, lecturers and postgraduates to consult whenever they feel like it, and the luxury of being just a student. If you are taking your degree in this way, perhaps through the Open University or through Oscail, then your experience of being a university student will be very different to that of someone studying on a full-time basis or at night.

The course book provided to you is your course of lectures and the tutor to whom you are assigned is your major contact, albeit via email. You will have a series of face-to-face tutorials for each module that you take but you may not be able to get to them. Many students find that they cannot get to the tutorials as they may live hours away and might have to arrange for a babysitter on top of the financial cost of the petrol, buses, trains, taxis or even the air-fare needed to get there. There may not be a library of any sort in your area and you may not have a quiet place in which to study. However, from personal experience of distance education, both as the tutor and as a student, I can offer the following advice, on top of all the rest that is provided throughout the book.

### Acquiring reading materials

Don't worry if there is no library in your area as quite likely it will not have most of the psychology books that you need anyway. You can order the core textbooks that you require from [www.thebookdepository.co.uk](http://www.thebookdepository.co.uk) or [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk) or similar websites. You may be able to find some of them via eBay or in secondhand bookshops in the nearest university town, or you might find that students who have already completed the modules you are taking are willing to sell you their books. Most of your additional reading should be in journal articles and you can access these from the comfort of your own home. The university with which you are registered will have a subscription to online journals (see below) and you will have been given a username and password that allow you to access these. You can download them, save them onto your computer, or print them out; it's up to you.

### Working with the course units

If your best learning style is visual then you will find it fairly easy to work from these and you will also have the benefit of being able to go through your lectures as often as you like, which other students can't. If your learning style is auditory then record yourself (or someone else) reading the units and listen to them whenever you have the chance. I have spoken to several distance education students who did

this anyway so that they could listen to the unit (i.e. lecture) on an mp3 player while doing the housework or on their lunch break or while commuting. You may or may not be given a timeline for progressing through the units so at the start of the year you should survey what is being covered and what is required in the TMAs (tutor marked assignments). Usually you will start at unit 1 and work your way through, doing one or two units a week, but you may have to change the order to suit the assignments. Of course you are free to leave out some units or to study them in whatever order you like, which a full-time or night student can't do; the lecturers determine the sequence for them.

### Contact with other students

You will have to have a computer and internet access for each of your various modules so take this a step further. You will be able to contact other students via online learning environments such as WebCT or Moodle; distance education courses usually have these set up so that they can pass on information easily and quickly to the students and tutors. These are like private websites with built in chat rooms so you can 'meet' some of your classmates even if you can never make it to a tutorial. Make use of this facility, if it is provided, as there is often someone currently online who will have the answer to your query. Join a social networking site such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* or *MySpace* and see if there is a support group there for fellow distance education students. There are many internet telephone services such as Skype, which are free-to-use (so long as you call other users of the same service) and free-to-download. These are a great way to make contact and keep in touch and also to enjoy virtual coffee breaks during which you can talk to someone rather than just type (though that option is there too, complete with cool emoticons). All you need to do is to download and install the software; it is best if you have a good broadband connection. If your computer has a built-in microphone then you don't need any headphones; just make sure that you have the volume turned up. If you don't have a built-in microphone then you will need headphones or a handset that are specifically designed for using with these services. Sometimes these are much cheaper if you source them through eBay rather than from a computer or electrical goods store, so do shop around.

### Virtual study groups

Having contacted classmates through a VLE such as WebCT or Moodle you can suggest setting up a virtual study group which can meet via Skype or any of the other online telephone services. Just make sure that everyone is using the same service and then the calls are free, no matter how many hours you spend connected. As with any study group, try to keep the numbers small. If you each have a webcam and a good broadband connection then you will be able to see each other and even use the camera to show each other what you are working on. You can also send and receive files instantly and so easily share or compare notes. Sometimes it is

helpful just to be connected to a fellow student, even if you are both working quietly and neither of you is actually talking (remember that it's free to use!). Just knowing that there is somebody else there, to whom you can talk if you like, can be a comfort and even a motivational source.

### Making a quiet place

Full-time students can usually go to the library or find an empty classroom if they want a reasonably quiet place in which to study, but if you are studying via distance education then you may find that there is no quiet place near you. You may be working at home, with or without children, or you may be working full-time and spending time commuting every day. However, so long as you don't run the risk of missing your stop or of not hearing something important, you can create a quiet place anywhere by buying a pair of industrial strength ear protectors. You can usually find them in any hardware store, particularly the larger ones, and as they are designed for use with noisy equipment you will find that they eliminate most of the background noise that is distracting you from your work. And if you are using them in a public place, for example on a train or in a coffee shop, you will find that people will not disturb or interrupt you as they seem to assume that you are listening to music and so probably won't hear them anyway. It may take a while to get used to them as they can feel a little uncomfortable if you are not used to wearing headphones (they tend to be tighter than regular headphones) but you will adapt and they really do eliminate most of the background noise.

### What are the main journal databases?

Chapter 3 focuses on evaluating academic literature and you should apply those guidelines when trying to evaluate the merit of internet sources too. Although you may be used to searching for information using general search engines such as Google, Yahoo or AltaVista, most of the information that is freely available on the internet is not suitable for use at university. Anybody can put anything on the web and so there is no guarantee that the content is accurate. When lecturers or tutors tell you to access articles online they do *not* mean that you should search the web or that you must browse through Wikipedia (*never* use that site for your essays as anybody can put information on it and it may not be accurate!). Instead what they are talking about are the online databases of academic journal articles that can be accessed through your university's library website. Your university will subscribe to some of these databases and this allows you to access and download articles for free. You should *never* have to pay for a journal article while you are an undergraduate. If you go on to do a Masters or a doctorate you may find that there are some articles that you need but these are not available through your university; this would require that you go to another university library that does have access, that you contact the authors and ask them if you may have a copy, or that you buy a copy.

Different universities will have different subscriptions and while they may have access to some or all of the same databases, they may not have purchased access to the entire content of those databases. This means that some of the content described below may not be available to you, or it might all be available. To access any of these you will need to have a valid username and password, issued by your university. You may only have access while using a university computer or your library may have set up a facility whereby you can access the databases from anywhere in the world, so long as you have the valid username and password. There are thousands of databases but I am only going to comment on some of the ones that you would access for full-text journal articles in psychology.

### Academic Search Premier/PsycARTICLES/PsycINFO

Academic Search Premier, PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO contain articles on every area of psychology and they are usually the first place to search. They are EBSCOhost databases that can be accessed separately or together and that give you the option to perform a variety of searches, from basic to advanced. You can search for articles by author, topic, keywords, year, and other parameters. They contain a wide variety of article types but I would recommend that you select the options for 'full text' and 'scholarly (peer reviewed) journals'. That way the links that it brings up will all be documents that you can read and download and which have been deemed to be of a suitably high standard. If you click on 'choose databases' then you can perform the search across a variety of the EBSCOhost databases at the same time. For example, you might have initially entered the Academic Search Premier database but selected 'choose databases' and added both PsycARTICLES and PsycINFO to your search. It is almost certain that your university will have a subscription to at least one of these three databases, if not all three.

When you perform a search it will bring up a list of links to articles. You will see an option to 'add to folder'. If you are trying to find several articles on a topic you can use this to filter the overall results of the search. Place the articles that may be useful into a virtual folder, using that option, and then you can view all those articles later, so long as you did not log out! You may see a link that says 'cited references' followed by a number in brackets. This is the list of all the sources that the paper has cited and if you click on that then you can access each of those articles too. If you see a link that says 'PDF full text' then this means that you can download the article directly and that the entire article is there for you to read. If this PDF link is not present then you may see a link that tells you to check your university's e-journals. This means that only the abstract is available in this database but that you may be able to find the whole article by looking for the journal in a different database (see below). Another link that you may see under the title of the article is 'linked full text'. If you click on this then it bring you to another site that may contain a link to the PDF file. To download the citations to a database such as EndNote or ProCite, add the articles you want to the folder, select 'view folder', select the ones you want to export, then click on the export icon (a white page with a green arrow on it), choose your database and press 'save'.

## SAGE Journals Online

This database contains the journals published by SAGE and it is another very valuable resource for psychology students; you will use it a lot if you have access to it. You can do quick searches or more advanced searches and there is the option to go through the whole database or just the content that is open to you. If you want to select a number of articles for looking at later (again, so long as you do not log out) then click on 'check item'. The links that you may see under the name of the journal article include abstract, Full Text (PDF), References, Table of Contents and MatchMaker. The first few of these are self-explanatory; they are the links that will bring you to that detail. MatchMaker may sound intriguing and it is a very valuable tool that will group together articles that are related or on a similar topic. If you are using a references database such as EndNote then click 'check item' for the articles you want, select 'add to my marked citations', select 'Email/Download/Save/Print My Marked Citations' and press GO, then make sure that the correct type of computer is selected (PC is the default setting), press 'EXPORT/DOWNLOAD to Citation Manager' and choose your database.

## Science Direct

This is another excellent database for psychology articles in all areas but where you will find it to be of most value is when hunting for articles for your classes on neuroscience. You can simply browse if you like but if you click on 'search' you can select options to perform a quick, advanced or expert search, to examine only journals or maybe books (or both), to pick a specific year or range of years or to pick a specific broad area, for example Arts and Humanities. The links that you will see under each article include preview, PDF, related articles and supplementary content. The first three are self-explanatory while the latter may include links to data, video clips or other materials. Again, if you are using EndNote, ProCite or similar tools then you will be able to transfer the citation to your database by clicking on 'export citation' and selecting the appropriate option. You will, of course, have to add the actual PDF file manually as exporting the citation only does what it says on the tin.

These are some of the main databases that will be available in most universities but there are, of course, others so check your university's library website to see which journal databases are available to you. These include Blackwell Synergy, Cambridge Journals Online, InformaWorld, JSTOR, Oxford Journals Online, Project Muse, SpringerLink, SwetsWise, Taylor & Francis Journals, Wiley Interscience and Wilson OmniFile Full Text, but you should also check out some of the medical and nursing journals from time to time. You will find that all of these are similar in style and in the types of searches that you can perform. In any of these databases you may find a note that says to check your university's e-journals. In addition to database subscriptions your university may also have subscriptions to individual journals and, if so, then you will be able to go directly to these and search them for what you

want. The link to the e-journals to which your university has a subscription will also appear on their library website. Browse these too as there may be entire journals available that focus on the specific subject that you are studying. If you do find an article in one of these journals and it says that there is a one-year embargo (i.e. your university's subscription means that you cannot access any article published by the journal in the past 12 months) then go to the databases and see if the same journal is there, without an embargo.

## Summary

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Note making is a very valuable skill. It may take time and practice to master it but if you keep trying you will find the approach that suits you. Good note-making strategies can save you time, increase the amount of information that you can cover and remember, and serve as a great study aid when it comes to preparing for exams. Your strategy may vary based on whether you are making notes in a lecture or studying from books or journal articles. You may also make modifications based on your motivation levels, on any physical or sensory difficulties that you have, or on whether you are taking your degree via distance education. Work from a variety of sources and in addition to studying the core textbooks try to read plenty of journal articles. These are freely available through the online databases to which your university subscribes.