
GETTING YOURSELF ORGANISED

Uni is different! If you're new or recently enrolled, you will probably be well aware how different the expectations, patterns and language can be when you're a degree level student.

Research shows that people organise themselves in very different ways. However, if you're in a new environment it takes time for even the best-organised individuals to adapt. Also, the most successful self-organisers have quite a lot of attitudes in common. It could be simpler than you think to make some changes to help you succeed and make the most of your time.

Step 1: Create a space and a time for study

University study requires you to have a space, time and attitude that will suit how you learn. Most people can get absorbed in a task they are committed to, in the right conditions; this is sometimes called 'being in the zone'.

Some questions to ask yourself:

- **What motivates you to study?** Understanding your motivations better is one of the most helpful ways to improve organisation. Quite often, people are motivated by things in their environment, making a commitment to other people, achieving a goal, fulfilling a responsibility or by success or reward. You may be able to build in something of what motivates you to your study time. In fact, although most people think they are not well organised, it's your attitude – how you think about study and what you do when you hit a problem – that can make the most difference.
- **What do you do to tell yourself that you are ready to begin working?** This might be going to a particular desk in the library, powering up your laptop, or standing in the kitchen thinking about what you're about to work on.
- **What sort of conditions help you to become absorbed?** This might be closing the door, phone on silent, music on or complete quiet. You probably find that you can work for longer periods at certain times of the day, though this can vary a lot.
- **How can you reduce distractions that arise from your work, like the need to leave your desk to look something up?** Lots of students have three or four books ready to hand or open on the desktop, and some even have a second screen connected or an old computer available close by.
- **No-one has endless time, so can other activities help you study?** Lots of people find it hard to think of ideas at their desk, but easy to do so when ironing, walking, training, cooking or talking work through with someone else. (Remember that you won't always be able to study for extended periods. Contrary to what you may have heard, there is no fixed rule about how long you can concentrate for, but students who study successfully often develop ways of recognising when they have had enough.)

Tip!

However you choose to organise your study space make sure you spend some time reflecting on what suits your personality and lifestyle and then make some conscious decisions.

Step 2: Take control of information

By definition, academic study involves lots of information! Getting yourself organised involves treating this information as though it belongs to you, and taking control of it so it can help you the most. There is lots of information... unit guides and materials, notes you take on readings, calculations and data sets, assignments and practice questions.

Some points to think about here:

- **Try to make notes that are both easy to write and easy to use later.** Notes next to Power Point slides don't need much planning in advance but many students find they don't look at them afterwards. It may help to make notes in the same format each time, and try to build up a bank of them. Try using notes software or file paper, and use a different page or sheet for each major point so you can add to it later.
- **Use a referencing tool (or index card) for every new source.** Every article, book or resource you look at is part of your work and you need to 'own' it. That doesn't mean you can copy from it but you may need to look back over it at any time.
- **Back your work up every day.** If your laptop or hard drive stops working, you will still need a way of finding your notes and assignments quickly. Backing up, ideally to more than one location, is just as important as saving work and needs to be done each time you study.
- **Save time.** Time intensive, low impact tasks like searching through folders are best avoided, so think about how you generally find it easiest to find documents and notes and build this into study. Many people use themes, topics and even the names of lecturers to organise folders and set files up so that a quick search of a drive will bring up the information they need. In the same way, rewriting notes word for word generally doesn't help learning – try summarising, highlighting or annotating instead.
- **Use your learning objectives.** The learning objectives for the area you are working on are stated in your unit guide. Once again, you can save time by using these to organise your folders and notes.
- **Attitude counts.** Once again, your attitude will often make the greatest difference. If you're struggling to understand a document or find a set of notes there will be a good explanation and neither of these mean you won't succeed with a topic. There is no 'perfect' way to take notes or organise your studies.

Tip!

The more easily retrievable these pieces of paper/electronic documents are the more easily you will be able to revise for your exams or complete your assignments.