

 **SAGE Study Skills**

Essential Study Skills

The Complete Guide to
Success at University

Tom Burns & Sandra Sinfield

4th Edition

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2

How to Learn, How to Study

We're not born knowing how to study – these learning and studying strategies will help you make the most of the study aspects of university.

• Introduction	18
• Past learning experiences	18
• What is learning?	19
• Harness a multi-sensory approach to learning	20
• Studying: when, where and how	21
• Independent learning	25
• A beginner's guide to taking control of your studies	26
• Summary	29
• Further reading	29
• Activity: two key things to do right now: learning contract and timetables	29



Introduction

In this chapter we bring together arguments about learning with an exploration of how to study – and how to study at university. We begin by asking you to examine your past learning experiences – and consider a multi-sensory approach to learning and how to harness this. We explore when, where and how to study – with a focus on how universities organise their teaching and learning; assessment is tackled in Chapters 11 and 12. As always – think: what do I know? What do I need? How will I harness this information to promote my active learning and study success?

Past learning experiences

Before moving on, we'd like you to think back to your own past learning experiences. In particular, think about the conditions that helped you to learn – and the things that got in the way of your learning. Make brief notes to answer the questions below – then read what another student has said.

- Think back to a previous successful learning experience. It does not have to have been at school – it could be learning to drive or sky dive. Why was it successful – why did you learn?
- Now think back to an unsuccessful learning experience. What was it? Why did little or no learning take place?
- Looking over these good and bad experiences of yours – can you sum up: 'Things that help learning to happen' and 'Things that prevent learning'?
- If you wish, use your notes to free write quickly on 'Things that help me learn – and things that stop me from learning'.
- Once you have completed your own thoughts, compare your thoughts with those written by another student, below.

Things that helped me to learn were an interesting course with a good teacher – you know, one that has enthusiasm for the subject and lots of energy. I seem to work better if I feel that the tutor likes me. It also helps when I actually *want* to do the course; where I have chosen it for myself and I actually want to learn. When I'm committed, I turn up and do the work – because I want to. The last course I did, there was a really supportive atmosphere – I felt challenged and stretched – but it was also safe to make mistakes, there were people around to help. Nobody laughed at you or made you feel a fool.

The worst learning experience I had was at school. I had to be there – it was compulsory – but I never really saw the point of it. I just felt so powerless all the time. I never knew what we were doing or why or when or how. It was a nightmare and one of the reasons that I left school the minute I could!

Do you recognise some of yourself in the responses? What might this tell you? One thing we can see is that if we are going to be successful when learning, then we must want to learn: we must be interested and motivated.

On the other hand, what seems to stop people from learning is feeling unmotivated, confused, unhappy, fearful and powerless. These are some of the reasons that compulsory education does not work for some people.

TIP

Whenever you start to study, sit down and write your own personal goals for that course. Put them on Post-its and display them over your desk. Cut out pictures that represent your success to you and stick these up also. Use these to keep you motivated and interested.

What is learning?

Learning is not about the empty student coming to university to be filled with knowledge and wisdom – though some people might wish that it was! Learning is active and interactive; it is a process. Learning involves engaging with ideas – and engaging with other people as they engage with ideas (Wenger-Trayner, 2014). An early author on study skills, Devine (1987), describes learning as a series of processes:

- gathering new ideas and information
- recording them
- organising them
- making sense of and understanding them
- remembering them
- using them.

Learning is about gathering new ideas and information – engaging with and acquiring information from classes, lectures, seminars, tutorials, discussions, practical activities, reading (textbooks, journals, newspapers and more). It is notemaking – recording what is important. We encounter information in many forms, in many places and at different times – we have to reorganise the information to make sense of it for ourselves and remember it. Finally we have to be able to use the information – we have to be able to discuss it with other people and use it in our assignments. Learning also changes us, once truly learned something cannot be unlearned – we have crossed a threshold and become someone slightly different (Land, 2010).

TIPS

- Before you can forget your lecture or class, don't rush home, go to the canteen and talk about it.
- Get a study partner or form a study group: discuss lectures and seminars. Discuss your reading.
- Write before you know or understand it all.
- Discuss your writing.

Harness a multi-sensory approach to learning

So learning is active and social and it also involves all the senses. If you went to a Montessori primary school, you would already have been encouraged to see, hear, say and do in order to learn effectively; for we learn some of what we see, we learn some of what we hear, we learn when we speak or discuss (when we say) and we learn when we do (when we make something or engage in an activity) – but it is argued that we can learn most when we see, hear, say *and* do. Here we explore visual (sight based), auditory (sound based) and kinaesthetic (touch, feel or movement based) learning.

- *Sight*: to learn by seeing, enjoy learning by reading and by watching television, film or video. Enjoy watching your lecturer and seeing how they convey information – how they show you what is important. Use pictures in your learning and revision activities: draw cartoons and pictures to illustrate your points, draw pattern notes, put in colour, and put in memory-jogging cartoon images or visuals. (See also Chapters 5 and 6.)
- *Sound*: to learn by hearing and speaking, enjoy learning through listening and joining in discussions. You will learn as you explain things to other people. Make audiotapes to support your learning using songs, rhymes and jingles that you write yourself as learning and revision aids. Tape yourself and sing along. Talk yourself through your assignment.
- *Feel*: to harness the kinaesthetic, enjoy practical learning activities, from making something, to performing a science experiment to role-playing. Make charts and patterns of the things you want to remember – role-play ideas or act them out in some way. Care about your subject – find meaning and value in your course.

Activity

Watch, listen, learn: Barbara Oakley has given an interesting TED Talk on 'How to learn' (<https://youtu.be/O96fE1E-rf8>). Watch the video and make notes whilst thinking, 'How will I use this information to become a better student?' Reflect: How much of the information did I hear? How much did I see? How much of it did I feel was right?

Studying: when, where and how

‘ I’m a mum, I work, I’ve got my parents to look after ... I guess I’m organised! ’

Studying is more formalised learning – and it tends to be hard work. We are going to explore when, where and how to study and provide you with very practical advice and tips.

When should I study?

‘ I know we are supposed to start work weeks before the deadline, but I usually start two or three days before. ’

Many students do not start work until a deadline really frightens them – they need the hit of adrenalin to get them over their study fears and into working. The trouble is that whilst adrenalin is great for getting you out of a burning building – it does not help you develop the depth and breadth you need for university level thinking and writing.

‘ The best tip I ever got was to do at least half an hour’s work each day. This has put me on top of all my studies ... And usually once I start I get a little bit more done and I feel so much better. ’

I know what I should do, I really know ... but I just can’t face it.

Studying can feel unbearable, un-do-able, like climbing a mountain. But there is more than one way to face a mountain. For some a mountain is so large and dangerous that they are afraid of it. For some a mountain is an exciting challenge. For some a mountain is just a thing to be tackled sensibly one step at a time. If you normally fear or dread your assignments – change the way you see them. Adopt a ‘one step at a time’ approach. Look at assignment questions at the beginning of a course. Think about the question before lectures and classes and before you start reading. Break the question down into manageable chunks. Read about one ‘chunk’ at a time. Write one paragraph at a time – then revise and improve as you do more reading.

‘ I never seem to feel like studying. ’

Nobody leaps out of bed in the morning going, 'Wheee – this is the day that I tackle that huge assignment!' So do not rely on feeling like studying. You have to make the time to study – you need a system. Every university student has to work out for themselves just how much time they are prepared to give to their studies – but it should be 35 hours or more each week. You have to decide how much work you are prepared to put in, to get the results – the grades – that you want. Study five days a week – plan and use your time – even when you don't feel like it.

When planning out your time think about:

- *Best time of day?* Are you a morning, afternoon or evening person? Try to fit your study times around your maximum performance times. Work with your strengths.
- *Travel time:* reading on the bus or train is a really effective use of time.
- *Friends and family time:* your studies are important – but most of us would like to have friends and family still talking to us when our studies are over. Help them to help you be a successful student.
- *Housework time:* we need to keep our homes at least sanitary. Watch out though – housework and all chores can become excellent excuses for not working. They become displacement activities – sometimes it feels as though it is easier to completely re-build the house rather than write an essay!
- *Paid work time:* these days we need to earn money whilst we study – we have to work – and still fit in 35 hours of study each week. Sometimes universities help by fitting lectures and other classes into one or two days a week. Beware – this does not mean that all your studying can fit into two days a week! Remember you have to give 12 to 16 hours to classes – and another 20 or so hours to independent study – *each week*. If you cannot do this, you will be in trouble.
- *Rest and relaxation time:* studying is hard work – it can also be very stressful. It is important to get sufficient rest whilst you study and it is useful to build stress relief activities – dancing, exercise, gym, meditation, massage, yoga – into your timetables right at the beginning of your studies.

TIPS

- Find paid work at your university – this helps you be there more.
- Join your university gym – use it at least once a week.
- *Prioritise time:* make lists and prioritise tasks. Keep a diary – note when you are going to read; note which assignment you are writing – when.

- *Study timetables:* timetables give you a strong guide to your work – if you keep to them. But more than that, without timetables you may feel that every time you are not working you ought to be studying. You may not do that studying, but you worry – and this exhausts you. Eventually it may feel that your whole life is work, work, work. Something will have to go – and it could be your studies! Use the timetables at the end of this chapter – plan when you will study – and when you will not study.

Where to study

Everyone deserves a nice place to study, but real life is not always like that; sometimes we just have to adapt to what we have and make it work. Here are some tips about making a study space work for you.

- Negotiate a space with family or flatmates. Creating a study space helps everyone in your life – including you – realise just how important your studies are.
- A good place to study needs light and air – you need to see and breathe – but does not necessarily have to be a completely quiet place. Work out what works for you.
- You will need space to lay out your work, pin up your timetables, deadlines and notes. Have your textbooks out and open.
- Pin up all the new words that you are learning, immerse yourself in your learning.
- Do not tidy your work away. Having your work visible keeps it alive in your mind whereas putting it all away can give the impression that you're finished.
- Have pens and pencils, also highlighters, a stapler and staples, paper clips, correction fluid, Post-its, coloured pens – and all sorts of different sizes of paper. Play around with materials and colour, get an injection of energy and enthusiasm.

Practise being positive: 'Now I am working', 'I enjoy being a student'. Avoid those old negative thoughts: 'I don't want to be here', 'This is too hard'. Negative thoughts have a negative effect – positive thoughts have a positive effect. Give 100% whenever you sit down to study. Act as if you and your studies are important – they are – so are you.

What other students have said:

It felt really good having my own study space. It made me feel like a real student.
I felt that at last I could settle down to some real work.

I felt a bit frightened at first – you know? Like now I couldn't put it off any longer!
I'd have to take it seriously.

Sometimes I use my space to sort of trick myself into working. I think, I'll just sit there for a minute ... Next thing I know I've been working away for an hour and I feel really good.

I felt guilty at having to cut myself off from the kids. It just felt so selfish. I have to work really hard at still giving them some time.

I used to get so frustrated; it was like every time I sat down to work they would start demanding things from me. Now we all sit down to work at the same time – even if they are just crayoning or reading a storybook. This has helped us all feel better.

I still like going to the library to work – but it's great having a proper place for my stuff at home. It really does help.

Experiment with working at home, in the library and when you travel – being a commuter adds hours of study time to your week, if you use it. But whether you want to work in a library or on a bus, you will also need a study space at home.

TIP

If you have children, try to make a family study time – so you all work together.

How to study

University is supposed to be a full-time occupation – using up to 35–40 hours of your time per week. You are supposed to be studying and learning full time, through lectures, seminars, tutorials, the virtual learning environment (VLE) and through your independent study. Here's how:

The lecture

One lecturer plus a large group of students – can be 150 or more. The lecturer is an expert, a researcher at the cutting edge of the subject. The lecturer gives a short-cut to key information – and successful students make notes – and use those notes to seed further reading, thought and writing. Always prepare before you attend a lecture. Always think – what is it about? What do I know already? Why this topic? How will it help me with my assignment?

The seminar

A seminar usually consists of a lecturer plus 10–30 students. A seminar is supposed to seed your thinking and develop your ideas through discussion – it is

active learning. Join in the discussions. Prepare beforehand: read, watch or write what you are supposed to.

Learn seminar survival strategies: know how to present your opinions assertively, not aggressively; learn how to interrupt the person who never stops talking; and learn how to draw out quiet people who may actually have much to offer. Don't worry whether people are making friends with you – you make friends with other people.

The tutorial

A tutorial is like the seminar but with one tutor to four or five students. There is definitely no hiding place in a tutorial. You will have to be prepared and you will have to join in.

The VLE

Universities include virtual, blended or e-learning experiences as part of their teaching and learning practices. Find out how your course is going to be delivered – and how to make the most of it. Even though the information is 'virtual' – the work is still real – and the learning is still social and interactive.

TIP

Be prepared to join in with online conversations about the work. If you are expected to post comments or blogs in the VLE – do so; and remember to read and 'like' the comments left by your peers – be supportive, encouraging and friendly. See also Chapter 10.

Independent learning

In the UK we 'read for' our degrees – that is, our thinking and learning is seeded by lectures and seminars – and then we are expected to read and read and read. There is much emphasis on independent learning. That is, you will be expected to follow up ideas in various ways, including reading around a subject, on your own and on your own initiative. For more on academic reading, see also Chapter 4.

TIP

Be an interdependent learner: have a study partner or group.

A beginner's guide to taking control of your studies

This whole book is designed to get you studying in more successful ways, but here are some very practical things to do right now.

Want it: you will not learn anything unless you want to. Know what you want from each course that you are studying. Know how your life will be changed when you reach your goals.

TIP

Write your goals on Post-its and stick them up in your study space. Write your learning contract (below) for each course, module or unit that you do.

Get the overview (Chapter 11.1): read and understand the aims and the learning outcomes. Know what you have to do and learn to pass your course – and how you will be assessed.

Epistemology: every course has its own theory of knowledge – what counts as argument and evidence – its epistemology. Make sure you know the what, why and how of all your subjects. Read the journals to get a model of how to argue and write in your subject.

Be positive: just as an athlete will perform better if they think they can win – so a student will learn more if they can adopt positive attitudes; if your motivation runs low, act like a successful student, believe that you can succeed.

Pace yourself: work for an hour – take a break. We concentrate best in 15-minute bursts. When we study we have to get into the habit of regularly recharging our mental batteries to wake up our brains. We can do this by:

- taking a short rest
- changing what we do
- making the task very important
- making the task interesting, stimulating or more difficult.

Prioritise time: be strategic – do first the assignments that carry the most marks or whose deadlines are coming first.

Use time: we know students who sit down to study – out come the pens and paper – they get rearranged. Out come the books and the highlighters – they get rearranged. They go for a coffee. They go for a glass of water. They put one lot of books away and get out another set. They look at the clock – oh good! An hour has passed – they put their materials away. But they have done no work. Before you study – set goals. Afterwards – reflect. Make the learning conscious.

Worry about one assignment at a time: put up a set of shelves in your brain. Put all your different worries on the shelves. Learn to take down one thing at a time and give it your total concentration. When you have finished with that, put it back on the shelf and take down something else.

Be active: listen/read actively, asking questions as you go. What does it mean? Do I understand it? If not, what am I going to do about that? How does it connect with what I already know? How will I use it in my assignment?

Review actively: at the end of each study session – reflect on what you have read or heard.

TIP

Write a blog post at the end of every day.

Study partners and groups: for many, study is best when undertaken actively, interactively and socially; this is where a friend, study partner or a study group can be invaluable.

Don't end on a sour note: try not to end a study session on a problem – it is demotivating and it can make it that little bit harder to start studying again. Use a study partner, friend or online discussion space to talk it over.

Relaxation and dealing with stress: make time to rest, relax and let go of stress. When we are stressed our body releases cortisol – a hormone that has a direct impact on the brain causing the cortex to shrink – and adrenalin – the flight or fight hormone. The combination of these hormones eliminates short-term memory and produces the narrow, tunnel vision necessary for fight or flight. This might save our lives when escaping from a burning building, but works against us when studying where we need breadth and depth of vision.

TIPS

- **Make a note of the problem and sleep on it – sometimes the solution comes to you when you wake up. But don't lie awake fretting all night; this does not solve the problem and you have made everything worse by losing sleep and gaining stress.**
- **Join the gym. Take up yoga. Practise meditation.**

Organisation and time management: if you are now feeling overwhelmed by all your responsibilities as a student, try this five-step plan to tackling those worries – and getting things done:

1. List everything that you need to do: this may feel like a really bad idea and that you'll be even more frightened; but the opposite is true. Once you write the list, and you can see the reality of the 'problem', it becomes more manageable and less overwhelming.
2. Divide each big task that you have to do into smaller steps. So do not just put down: 'write essay'. Break it down: 'brainstorm question', 'read up on ...', 'write a paragraph on ...', etc.

3. Organise your big list into things that must be done now; soon; later.
4. Do one of the *now* tasks immediately and cross it off. You will instantly feel more calm and in control.
5. Prioritise your list and put it into a 'to do' order.
(With thanks to our colleagues at Reading University.)

Still procrastinating? You have to be organised – you have to be methodical – do not procrastinate – just do it! Try this activity suggested by Michelle Reid of Reading University. Work with a group of friends, especially if they are fellow students. You will need Post-it notes and pens.

Activity

The time sponge

Everybody takes one large Post-it and writes their biggest time sponge at the top (a time sponge is anything you find yourself doing instead of working – checking your phone, messaging friends, etc.).

Everybody passes their Post-it to the person on their left. You all read someone else's time sponge problem and write a possible solution.

Pass to the left again and write another solution to another problem.

Keep going until you have run out of space on the Post-its.

Everybody takes a turn to read out the problem on the Post-it they have been left with – and the various solutions offered.

Everybody says one thing they will now do differently after listening to all the sponges and solutions.

When planning your time – think about these:

- *Study timetable*: this is a 24/7 timetable (24 hours a day, seven days a week) that covers how many hours per day go to non-study and how many go to your studies. It is where you can plan which subjects to study and for how long. It takes some trial and error and experiment to get this right – so do give it that time.
- *Assignment timetable*: this is a record of all the assignment deadlines that are coming up either in a term, a semester or across a whole year. Fill in deadlines and pin it up on your wall and place a copy in your folder and diary. Never let a deadline take you by surprise.
- *Exam timetable*: similar to the assignment timetable, this is a record of all the exams you will be taking. Note dates, times and locations. It is all too easy to turn up at the wrong time, on the wrong day and in the wrong place!

- *Revision timetable*: at the appropriate time, each student should devise their own revision timetable where they work out when they are going to test their knowledge and practise for the exams that they are going to sit

Photocopy the timetables below: experiment with using them to help you focus on your work and get the most from your time.

Summary

We have looked at learning and considered when, where and how to study; some authors call this SHAPE: style, habit, attitude, preference and experience. The trouble is that we may stay with unsuccessful study habits even when they do not work, just because they are that – a habit or a preference. None of the good practice in this chapter will mean anything unless and until you put the ideas into practice. Until you push through your discomfort and learn new, successful practices.

Further reading

BBC Scotland's Brain Smart website: www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/brainsmart/.

Devine, T.G. (1987) *Teaching Study Skills*. Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Wenger-Trayner, E. (2014) Key note at ALDinHE Conference, Huddersfield University, 2014.

Activity

Two key things to do right now: learning contract and timetables

1 Write a learning contract

Reflect on what you have read so far and write a brief learning contract saying what you want from your course: what you're prepared to do to achieve your goals, what might stop you, and what's in it for you (what will change about your life when you achieve your own goals).

- What I want from this course is ...
- What I'm prepared to do to make this happen is ... (Use the six steps to success like this ... Build on my visual strategies like this ... Visit the library ... Write for half an hour every day ...)
- What might stop me is ... (Note the issues in your life: work, family, friends ... How might these affect your studies? What are you going to do about that?)
- What's in it for me (WiiFM) is ... (Knowing WiiFM can help motivate you on those cold, wet days when it feels too hard to get out of bed ...).

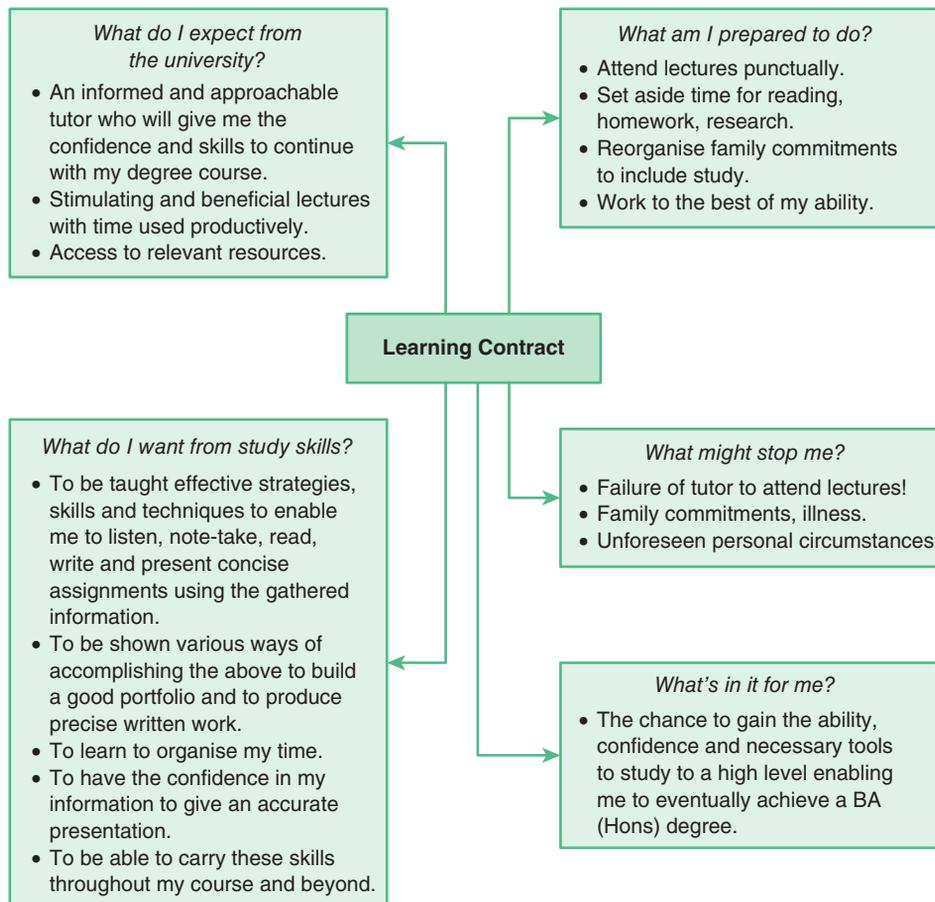


FIGURE 2.1 An example of a learning contract

2 Fill in your timetables

Take some time to complete the following timetables – and experiment with them – see how to use them to organise and motivate yourself.

TIP

We have put in *two* blank 24/7 timetables – complete one as a *plan*; complete the other as a *review*. Then decide how you will need to adjust your plans to be more successful.

Filling in the 24-hour timetable:

- Fill in the first one, indicating when you expect to work, sleep, do chores and so forth. Think about the time that you have left. Put in times for study and relaxation. Think about it – are you being realistic? Make sure that you are not under- or over-working yourself. Run that programme for a few weeks.

- After a couple of weeks, review your success in keeping to the study times that you set and in achieving the goals that you had in mind.
- Change your timetable to fit in with reality. Use the second blank timetable for this.
- Remember to do this every term, semester, year.

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
1.00							
2.00							
3.00							
4.00							
5.00							
6.00							
7.00							
8.00							
9.00							
10.00							
11.00							
12.00							
13.00							
14.00							
15.00							
16.00							
17.00							
18.00							
19.00							
20.00							
21.00							
22.00							
23.00							
24.00							

FIGURE 2.2 Blank 24-hour timetable – plan

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
1.00							
2.00							
3.00							
4.00							
5.00							
6.00							
7.00							
8.00							
9.00							
10.00							
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16.00							
17.00							
18.00							
19.00							
20.00							
21.00							
22.00							
23.00							
24.00							

FIGURE 2.3 Blank 24-hour timetable – review and improve

Events and deadlines				
Write down the dates of the following events each term:				
	Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	Course 4
Course title				
Exam(s)				
Essay deadline(s)				
Laboratory report deadline(s)				
Seminar presentations				
Field trips/visits				
Project report or exhibition deadlines				
Bank holidays or other 'days off'				
Other events (specify)				

FIGURE 2.4 Course events and deadlines timetable

Term plan – what is happening over your terms/semester?							
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Week 1							
Week 2							
Week 3							
Week 4							
Week 5							
Week 6							
Week 7							
Week 8							
Week 9							
Week 10							
Week 11							
Week 12							
Longer term deadlines:							

FIGURE 2.5 Term plan timetable

Keep a weekly plan: key events and activities each week							
Week Number:	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8am							
9am							
10am							
11am							
12 noon							
1pm							
2pm							
3pm							
4pm							
5pm							
6pm							
7pm							
8pm							
9pm							
10pm							
11pm							
12 midnight							
1am							

FIGURE 2.6 Weekly plan timetable