



The University of Sydney

Learning Centre

First Year Experience Series:

Being a More Effective Learner

Karen Scouller



First Year Experience Series: Being a More Effective Learner

Scouller, Karen, *First Year Experience Series: Being a More Effective Learner*
ISBN 1 86487 444 9

© 2001 Learning Centre
University of Sydney
Education Building A35
Tel +61 2 93513853 Fax +61 2 93514865
Email: lc@stuserv.usyd.edu.au
Website: <http://www.usyd.edu.au/lc>

This booklet is one of a set of three which deal with organisational and time management skills for first year undergraduate students.

- Booklet 1: **Understanding Yourself**
understanding yourself as a learner
understanding your lifestyle
- Booklet 2: **Being a More Effective Learner**
setting goals and making changes
improving concentration
dealing with procrastination
- Booklet 3: **Using Planners and Plans**
using a semester planner: getting an overview
using a weekly plan: organising your week
using a sessional plan: designing one study session

This first year series was developed as part of the
Sydney Welcome Orientation and Transition (SWOT) program.

Introduction to these Resources

First year undergraduate students are a very diverse group. You may have entered university straight from school or as a mature age student, you may be an international student, or you may have a disability. You also have much in common. You are all in a transitional period as you enter and have to learn the expectations and rules of this new learning environment.

What are your main fears?

Most first year undergraduate students feel both excited and worried when beginning their university studies.

Excited because you have many new experiences and challenges ahead.

Worried because you may feel confused and unsure about the expectations and standards required.

Typical questions are:

What's expected of me?

How am I going to get through all this reading?

How will I be assessed?

How will I know when I have studied enough?

How will I manage my time properly and organise myself?

How is university different from school?

Although you are not all recent school leavers, your last memory of formal learning probably goes back to your school days. So thinking about the differences between university and school is a useful starting point. Some important differences are:

There are many different learning situations; e.g. lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions.

You have much greater control over your own time, and can make your own decisions about attending lectures, and tutorials and so on.

The campus is much larger - you need to become familiar with buildings sometimes scattered over a wide area (especially for Arts and Humanity students).

Campus life is rich and tempting - there are many associations and clubs that you can join so that you participate fully in university life.

The learning environment is more impersonal.

Your work load is greater and work differs in quantity and quality from that of school.

What can you learn from these resources?

These resources are designed to help you become better at organising yourself and managing your time which are important skills for success at university.

These skills are presented in 3 booklets as listed below.

Booklet 2: Being a more effective learner
setting goals and making changes
improving concentration
dealing with procrastination

Booklet 1: Understanding yourself
understanding yourself as a learner
understanding your lifestyle

Booklet 3: Using planners and plans
using a semester planner: getting an overview
using a weekly plan: organising your week
using a sessional plan: designing one study session

Introduction to Booklet 2

Being a More Effective Learner

Booklet 2 looks at ways to help you be a more effective learner and to use your private study time more effectively. It focuses in particular on strategies aimed at helping you set goals and make changes, improving your levels of concentration, and helping you deal with procrastination.

It aims to encourage you:

- to reflect upon your current work patterns and learning style
- to identify changes you would like to make
- to practise new strategies
- to reflect upon and monitor your progress

How can you best use the resources?

Use the diagnostic task (see page 4) as the basis for planning a self study programme.

Design a programme that suits your timetable, and disciplinary and learning demands.

Select, practise and adapt, if necessary, some or all of the suggested strategies.

Persist with some of the desired changes to your work patterns and lifestyle.

Follow up other units (if you wish / need to) which are cross-referenced in the materials.

Continue to monitor your study behaviours long after you have completed these exercises.

Remind yourself of your strengths and academic successes and remember to feel good about yourself as you successfully make the changes you want.

Ask Yourself these Questions

Asking yourself these questions can be the starting point in your journey. They provide an overview of work patterns, study behaviours, and lifestyle issues. They may suggest areas of difficulty you have not previously considered and areas of strength you have not recognised. They suggest which other booklets in this series might be appropriate for you to complete.

Instructions:

Read the following brief descriptions of study patterns and feelings and determine which ones describe you. Refer to Column 2 for planning your self study programme.

Work Patterns	Self Study Resources
<input type="checkbox"/> I don't know when, where and how I study best <input type="checkbox"/> I don't understand where the time goes but I haven't done what I needed to do <input type="checkbox"/> I waste a lot of time <input type="checkbox"/> I don't spend enough time on academic work <input type="checkbox"/> I spend too much time on my work which is not reflected in better results <input type="checkbox"/> I want to change my study patterns but don't know how or where to start <input type="checkbox"/> I can't concentrate for long <input type="checkbox"/> I get easily distracted <input type="checkbox"/> I find it hard to get started with my work <input type="checkbox"/> I leave my work to the last moment <input type="checkbox"/> I ask for extensions for my assignments <input type="checkbox"/> I don't keep up with the weekly readings <input type="checkbox"/> I lose track of what I should be doing	Booklet 1 Part 1 - understanding yourself as a learner Booklet 1 Part 2 - understanding your lifestyle Booklet 2 Part 1 - setting goals and making changes Booklet 3 Parts 1-3 - designing planners and plans Booklet 2 Part 1 - setting goals and making changes Booklet 2 Part 2 - improving concentration Booklet 2 Part 3 - dealing with procrastination Booklet 3 Parts 1-3 - designing planners and plans
Feelings	
<input type="checkbox"/> I feel everything is out of my control <input type="checkbox"/> I feel guilty whenever I'm not working <input type="checkbox"/> I resent working more hours than other students to complete the same amount of work	all the booklets will add to your feeling more confident, more in control, less anxious, and less guilty



PART 1

SETTING GOALS
AND MAKING
CHANGES

PART I

SETTING GOALS AND MAKING CHANGES

OBJECTIVES OF PART I

After you have completed this section, we hope you will be able to:

- set realistic academic goals
- identify the steps needed to reach those goals
- make changes to your behaviours and study patterns to achieve your goals

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

In this section, you will practise setting and evaluating personal and academic goals, both short-term and long-term ones. For example, a short-term academic goal may be to complete the next assignment at credit or distinction level; a long-term academic goal may be to enrol for postgraduate studies. Focusing on academic goals, you will reflect upon and identify the steps and behavioural changes required to achieve them.

How to Set Realistic Goals

Being able to set and monitor realistic goals are important academic and organisational skills, and indeed very valuable life skills.

⌘ Exercise 1

- a) On Table 2.1 list your most important goals.

Table 2.1 Setting goals

	Short-term goals	Long-term goals
Personal goals		
Academic goals		

- b) Then go back over the lists:
- i. reflect on how realistic each goal is and delete those that you feel are unrealistic
 - ii. rank the remaining goals in order of importance

Your reflections should include a consideration of your strengths and weaknesses as a learner, your lifestyle, and how your personal and academic goals interact.

How to Achieve your Goals

Setting yourself goals is important but not enough. The next essential stage is planning how to achieve your goals, that is, planning the steps needed to reach them. The exercise below practises this skill in terms of both one long-term and one short-term academic goal.

For example, if your long-term academic goal is to enrol in postgraduate studies, then the steps might be:

- a. to get information on requirements and entry criteria (for example, from the Postgraduate Students' Handbook) - you need to know the level of performance required, how competitive it is, how you enrol, how long it takes to complete the degree, what fees are involved, who makes the decision to accept or reject your application ...
- b. to discuss your goal with a staff member in the appropriate department and examine your academic record to see if you are fulfilling requirements so far
- c. once you have all the relevant information, to reflect on how realistic this goal is, for example, are you performing at the appropriate academic level (credit or distinction) in this subject? What more should you do? Are you prepared to study for a further x years? Can you afford it financially? What do you need to do to ensure adequate finances? ...
- d. to organise your life and studies to assist you to meet the entry requirements and to make the relevant changes.

⌘ Exercise 2

Choose one short-term academic goal and one long-term academic goal and list the steps needed to achieve them in the space provided below.

- a) short-term academic goal = _____

steps

b) long-term academic goal = _____

steps

How to Set Realistic Goals for Making Changes

The question that you need to consider is:

what changes in organising and using my time
do I need to make in order to achieve my goals?

Having set your goals your reflections and the changes you want to make may involve the suggested strategies from all the modules in this series.

You may consider:

- your responses to the questions on your study habits and learning style, the lists of your strengths and weaknesses, and the suggested strategies, (Booklet 1 Part 1),
- how you (mis)use your time from your diary (Booklet 1 Part 2),
- suggested strategies for improving your concentration (Booklet 2 Part 2), and for dealing with your procrastination (Booklet 2 Part 3), and
- strategies for designing planners and plans (Booklet 3 Parts 1, 2 and 3).

Making changes to your study patterns and aspects of your lifestyle can be difficult.

It involves:

- selecting and listing the changes to be made,
- ranking them so that you know which ones to work on first and how to proceed,
- monitoring your progress so that you can decide if and when the new behaviour has been in place sufficiently long for you to think of it as a new habit.

⌘ Exercise 3

Look at the plan (Table 2.2) below of a first year student, Anna, and evaluate its effectiveness. Jot down what you think is effective and poor about the plan. What problems might she have in fulfilling these changes?

Table 2.2 Example of a plan to make changes

Changes to Study Habits and Lifestyle	Priority Ranking	Date Achieved
a. Write out a plan for each study session.	5	
b. Use early morning hours for private study.	6	
c. Organise my lecture notes in folders.	2	
d. Use ear plugs when I study.	1	
e. Take a break every hour and do stretching exercises.	4	
f. Stop watching so much TV - watch only my favourites.	7	
g. Get more sleep.	3	

Your evaluation:

Comments on Table 2.2

From the example above you can see that some changes are **minor** ones and can be made straight away without too much trouble, for example, buying and using ear plugs. But other changes are **major** ones and may require a great deal of persistence.

Remember that study habits, like all habits, are not easy to change - this is why they are called "habits" - they function at an automatic level because you have used and practised them over many years. To develop new habits (and replace the old ones) therefore will take time.

This plan starts off well:

- a. The first two rankings ('use ear plugs ..' and 'organise lecture notes ..') are minor changes. They are readily achievable and will give her some feelings of success.
- b. However, Ranking 3 ('get more sleep') is more problematic. This may take much longer to achieve than other behaviours. It is complicated by Ranking 6 ('use early morning hours ..') since enormous changes in sleeping patterns and lifestyle are being planned. This must be persisted with and be worked on concurrently over time with other minor and more quickly achievable changes.
- c. Rankings 4, 5 and 7 are relatively minor ones, although Ranking 7 appears to be a common problem for many university students and may therefore be more difficult to achieve.

Read the list of strategies below before writing your own plan.

Strategies for Making Changes

- Start with some minor goals first so that you feel good about starting the process and so that you experience some success straight away.
- Only attempt one major change at a time - if you try to change your lifestyle and too many major study habits overnight you will set yourself up for failure and not make any changes at all.
- Persist practising the new patterns and do not give up in frustration too early - remind yourself constantly that habits do not change quickly.
- Order the changes in terms of *your* needs and goals - you may have decided a different order to the one above.
- Reward yourself with a tick (and a more tangible reward if you like) when you feel you have made the desired change so that it feels comfortable - you may also wish to record the date since this allows you to monitor your progress.
- Keep your list handy and visible (for example, on a notice board above your desk or taped to your desk) to remind yourself of what you have achieved and must still achieve.

Additional Comments

- How can you tell when an old "bad" habit has been replaced by a new "good" one? This is a decision that you have to make. The most obvious criterion is when you do not have to think about it any more.
- Some changes cannot be achieved by a specific date, for example, *get more sleep* might be your first priority and yet may take much longer to achieve than other patterns that are less important to you.
- You may not achieve all your changes within a set time frame nor achieve them in the order you have designated. Do not be too hard on yourself and do not become despondent - the ranking is a guideline as to your priorities. You have to be flexible and at the same time persist with some changes.
- You may decide to change priority rankings as circumstances change.

⌘ Exercise 4

- a) Complete Table 2.3 below in the same way as the Sample Plan (Table 2.2).

- a. List the changes to your study habits/learning style and to your lifestyle that will allow you to use your time more efficiently and to achieve your goals, and that will work well for you.
 - b. Rank the changes you wish to make by placing numbers next to each one so that you know where to start and how to proceed.
- b) Monitor your progress and record when you have made the desired change. You may wish to record the date or place a tick in the column next to the behaviour.

Table 2.3 Your plan for making changes

Changes to Study Habits and Lifestyle	Priority Ranking	Date Achieved

SUMMARY OF BOOKLET 2: PART 1
 Setting Goals and Making Changes

Managing your time involves:

1. setting and prioritising short-term and long-term academic goals,
2. making the appropriate changes to your study habits that are workable for you,
3. selecting and practising only one major change at first, and
4. changing your study behaviours gradually.



PART 2

IMPROVING
CONCENTRATION

PART 2: IMPROVING CONCENTRATION

OBJECTIVES OF PART 2

After you have completed this section, we hope you will

- have reflected on the cause(s) of your concentration loss
- have identified the strategies which will help you improve your concentration
- have considered how to implement the strategies.

INTRODUCTION TO PART 2

In this section we will consider various aspects of concentration loss - why and how often it occurs and what you can do about it. Concentration refers to that type of intense engagement with the task where you can lose yourself in the activity and you feel good because you know you are working really well and getting a lot done. It is the sort of concentration that you would like to have every study session - without it you are wasting a lot of your time.

⌘ Exercise 1

Read the following scenarios about two first year students and jot down what you think is effective and poor about their study habits and use of time. They are fairly typically descriptions of concentration.

Kate is good at organising her study and her time - she knows what she has to do, she allocates time to do it in and designs wonderful weekly and daily plans so that she can complete all her assignments by the due dates. Yet when she sits at her desk she finds herself gazing out of the window and thinking about other things.

At the end of each session **Steve** always feels that he has not done enough work. He does not have a plan so that he never knows what he should be doing and how much he could be doing. He can work really well for short periods of time but loses interest frequently.

Kate:

Steve:

Comments on scenarios

Kate is good at planning and setting aside private study time. This is important but not enough. Good time management also involves using time efficiently when it has been set aside. Kate is wasting the opportunity she has set up for herself.

Steve needs to give his private study sessions more focus. He should be setting goals for each session, and reassessing his study techniques to find ways to be more actively involved, for example, reading more efficiently, taking notes, reviewing his understanding.

Booklet 3 Part 3 provides practice in writing a sessional plan.

⌘ Exercise 2

Reflect upon your experiences with concentration loss. Do either of these patterns fit you? While reflecting on your own experiences with concentration loss, consider some of the following questions.

- i. How long can you concentrate on one piece of work during a study session? Is this generally typical of you? That is, do you have a similar concentration span when performing non-academic tasks?
- ii. Do you feel that your concentration and distractibility levels are poorer than other students? If so, in what ways?
- iii. What strategies do you use to improve your concentration levels? Note here any that have worked in the past.

See comments on Exercise 2 overpage.

Comments on Exercise 2

Are your difficulties with concentrating different to those in the 2 scenarios above? If so, in what ways? It is worthwhile thinking about this and identifying the cause(s) of concentration loss so that you can work on the solutions. These will consist of strategies to help you overcome your concentration loss.

i. Length of concentration span

- If a relatively short concentration span is typical of you in a number of situations then your aim should be to increase your concentration span. You should do this slowly and in a number of different contexts, starting with activities that are particularly enjoyable.
- If however you have a short concentration span for study purposes but are able to concentrate well when engaged in non-academic activities - then it is a question of motivation and interest. Everyone experiences lack of interest and/or lack of motivation sometimes. And even when you are really interested in the course as a whole there is often a part of the course that interests you less. Your task becomes one of finding ways to aid your concentration when you feel unmotivated to study and/or you are not interested in a particular topic.
- If you find that you are unmotivated and disinterested in your studies most of the time you should reflect on your goals (both long-term and short-term) and consider how realistic they are and whether the courses (and future career) you have chosen are appropriate. It may be useful to discuss these issues with a student counsellor or careers counsellor since implementing academic strategies does not always help when dealing with more complex motivational issues.

ii. It is hard to compare concentration levels but students often discuss and compare such aspects of their studying techniques. All students sometimes experience concentration loss. However differences may exist in terms of how often this occurs, for how long and how easy it is to return to your work with real concentration. If you feel that your concentration is significantly poorer than others then this should motivate you to develop and practise new strategies.

iii. Compare your list of strategies with those presented below.

⌘ Exercise 3

The following causes of lack of concentration have been grouped into 3 areas:- academic/learning style issues, planning/organisational issues, and lifestyle/personal issues - and have been listed below. Circle (or highlight) those which you commonly experience. Does your selection of causes cluster in one area or across many?

Some Causes of Concentration Loss

Academic/learning style issues

- a. poor reading and study skills
- b. difficulty in keeping all the information in mind simultaneously and in understanding the sequence of information
- c. not coping with the difficulty level of material
- d. not understanding the technical and subtechnical terms of the subject area
- e. not understanding the task requirements
- f. habitual short concentration span; i.e. maximum=10-15 minutes

Planning/organisational issues

- g. failure to set goals and prioritise tasks
- h. failure to make a plan for each study session
- i. failure to organise space and materials

Lifestyle/personal issues

- j. too many interruptions; e.g. phone calls, household noise, TV
- k. not getting the right balance between academic and non-academic activities; e.g. a very active social life, too many non-academic interests and hobbies, need for paid employment, and so on
- l. tiredness
- m. boredom and low motivation levels
- n. lack of self-discipline, inability to say 'no', too easily tempted by other (non-academic) activities
- o. feelings of anxiety and frustration
- p. personal and/or familial problems and distractions

⌘ Exercise 4

Consider each group in turn. Read the strategies below and consider which ones you feel would work for you. They are of course directly related to the cause(s) you identified above. The letters of causes are listed in the first column of the table below. Can you think of other causes of your poor concentration levels?

1. Academic/learning style issues

Cause	Strategies	Concentration improved by:
a.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify the areas of difficulty and practise specific skills, e.g. skim your text before reading in detail to give yourself an overview • be actively involved in your work, e.g. take notes, underline key points, talk aloud 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing understanding of material • more active engagement with task • increasing interest and motivation
b.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • integrate your material, e.g. draw diagrammatic representations of information on one page - flow charts, taxonomies, concept maps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing understanding of material by seeing connections and relationships
c.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • find easier texts to bridge gap between the more difficult level of material and your current level of understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing understanding of material
d.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • become familiar with technical language of subject - use subject dictionary, keep your own list of common technical and subtechnical terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing understanding of material
e.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use available resources, clarify task requirements, and seek early support if needed, e.g. staff, students, learning centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding academic expectations and/or requirements
f.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • study in short bursts and gradually build up the length of study sessions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * start with an easy or very interesting topic in set time, e.g. 15 minutes * skim first to gain an overview of material * increase set time gradually * keep a record of times and topics * give yourself a reward each time you concentrate well for set time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gradually increasing concentration span • increasing understanding of material with fewer interruptions

2. Planning/organisational issues

Cause	Strategies	Concentration Improved by:
g.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set and prioritise short-term goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowing what you wish to achieve • preventing procrastination • experiencing success
h.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • plan each study session • establish a routine, e.g. start at the same time and/or with the same activity each study session • plan study activities according to your best (and worst) times, e.g. work on your most conceptually complex material when you are at your most alert and on the easiest tasks when you are least alert (filing or photocopying) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preventing procrastination • developing more appropriate habits • increasing motivation and interest • eliminating time wasting activities • using maximum energy • feeling less tired • increasing interest and motivation • experiencing success
i.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organise study space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * set up best place for study (quiet, pleasant, undisturbed, well-lit, well-ventilated) * have alternative study area in mind for emergency * set up desk with everything ready (books, pencils, pen, pad ...) • organise your materials - filing systems, folders, notes, written assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • having access to materials quickly • eliminating time wasting activities • preventing procrastination • having access to materials quickly • eliminating time wasting activities

3. Lifestyle/personal issues

Cause	Strategies	Concentration Improved by:
j.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anticipate and eliminate possible interruptions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * keep your phone calls brief or take it off the hook, or put on your answering machine (if you have one) * use ear plugs if noisy (e.g. outside noise traffic; or household noise - TV on in another room) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preventing disruptions • ensuring ideal study conditions
j. & k.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seek cooperation from friends and family to help you maintain an appropriate balance between university and non-university commitments (and not undermine your efforts and tempt you away from private study when necessary) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing your sense of control • eliminating potential disruptions and problems
k.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make changes to your work patterns and organise your life to get a balance between your various commitments and interests (see Booklet 2 Part 1) • set up and follow semester planners and weekly / sessional plans (see Booklet 3 Parts 1, 2 and 3) • keep a diary (see Booklet 1 Part 2) for a week to discover how you typically use (and maybe mis-use) your time and cut down on some recreational activities (if excessive) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing confidence that you are in control and organised • increasing motivation • increasing your sense of control • increasing your understanding of how your lifestyle impacts on study
l.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lead a healthy lifestyle, e.g. get enough sleep, eat healthy foods, get some exercise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dealing with tiredness

3. Lifestyle/personal issues (cont'd)

Cause	Strategies	Concentration Improved by:
l.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take rest breaks, e.g. 5-10 minutes every hour <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * choose a break activity that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. is different from what you are currently doing, b. is in your control to end quickly, and c. rejuvenates you, e.g. do some stretching or physical exercises, have a brisk walk, get some fresh air if your room is getting stuffy and so on * do not choose an activity that <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. is a continuation of your study activity, e.g. reading a book or newspaper when you need to rest your eyes, and b. makes returning to your desk in 5-10 minutes difficult; e.g. sitting in front of TV and watching an entire programme; or making a 10 minute phone call which goes on for an hour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing energy and alertness • feeling less tired
m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • vary your tasks and subjects in each session: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * break up a study session into several smaller tasks * include different activities, e.g. reading (textbook), doing (maths problems), thinking and planning (essay), summarising (lecture notes), writing (report) and so on * include a mix of subjects or topics, e.g. Sociology, Statistics, Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing interest and motivation • setting achievable short-term goals • experiencing success • experiencing less boredom

3. Lifestyle/personal issues (cont'd)

Cause	Strategies	Concentration improved by:
m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • read a more interesting book on the same topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing motivation and interest • dealing with boredom
m. & n.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give yourself rewards for successful completion of tasks or sub-tasks as planned: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * choose a reward that you will enjoy and will really motivate you * do not give yourself the reward if you have not achieved your goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing sense of control • increasing self-discipline • increasing motivation • increasing interest
n.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seek cooperation from friends and family to support your efforts and not tempt you away from private study when it is necessary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing sense of control • eliminating potential disruptions and problems
o.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • learn stress management and relaxation techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dealing more effectively with anxiety
p.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • talk to a counsellor or health professional if ongoing personal or family problems requires attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dealing with personal and family problems quickly and effectively

How to Implement New Strategies

⌘ Exercise 5

- a) Read the information below from Booklet 2 Part 1 Setting Goals and Making Changes which provides strategies for making changes. Page 11 has been partially reproduced here to remind you of the strategies.

Strategies for Making Changes

- Start with some minor goals first so that you feel good about starting the process and experience some success straight away.
- Only attempt one major change at a time - if you try to change your lifestyle and too many major study habits overnight you will set yourself up for failure and not make any changes at all.
- Persist practising the new patterns and do not give up in frustration too early - remind yourself constantly that habits do not change quickly.
- Order the changes in terms of your needs and goals.
- Reward yourself with a tick (and a more tangible reward if you like) when you feel you have made the desired change so that it feels comfortable - you may also wish to record the date since this also allows you to monitor your progress.
- Keep your list handy and visible (e.g. on a notice board above your desk or taped to your desk) to remind yourself of what you have achieved and must still achieve.

- b) Follow the steps below in order to make the desired changes.
- i. Reflect on the causes of your poor concentration levels and on the strategies suggested above for improving your concentration.
 - ii. List (on Table 2.4) all the strategies that you believe will improve your concentration levels and that you intend to practise.
 - iii. Rank them in the order that you will implement them, keeping in mind the strategies for making changes given above, for example, start with a minor change.

Table 2.4 Your plan for improving your concentration

Strategies	Priority Ranking

c) Note here the first strategy that you intend to put into practice to improve your levels of concentration.

SUMMARY OF BOOKLET 2: PART 2
Improving Concentration

1. Identify the cause(s) of your concentration loss.
2. Identify the strategies that will improve your concentration levels.
3. Select and practise only one major change at first.
4. Change your study behaviours gradually.



PART 3

DEALING WITH
PROCRASTINATION

PART 3: DEALING WITH PROCRASTINATION

OBJECTIVES OF PART 3

After you have completed this section, we hope you will

- have reflected on the cause(s) of your procrastination
- have identified the strategies will help you deal with procrastination
- have considered how to implement the strategies.

INTRODUCTION TO PART 3

In this section we will consider various aspects of procrastination - why it occurs, how often it occurs and what you can do about it. Procrastination refers to that type of behaviour where you fail to implement some action or policy that you know is necessary, and continually put off starting a task. We all procrastinate sometimes but it becomes a problem when most of your academic work is left to the last moment so that there is never enough time to complete and hand in work of some quality. Dealing with procrastination is a very important part of effective study. It allows you to feel that you are in control.

⌘ Exercise 1

- a) Read the following scenarios and jot down the advice you would give these two first year students to help them deal with their procrastination and start their work earlier. These are fairly typical descriptions of procrastinators.

Jason and Hannah are procrastinators who leave their work to the last moment. Then they find the motivation and concentration to do it. Their patterns are different however.

Jason says he has no self-discipline. He is using the same study methods he used at high school. He enjoys having a good time and he just can not say 'no' if tempted by another (more fun sounding) activity. Jason is out most of the time and does the minimum amount of work to pass his courses. He hands his work in on time and usually completes it by staying up very late the night before it is due. He finds this very stressful but can not seem to change the pattern.

Hannah never hands her work in on time - she is always asking for extensions and losing marks for lateness. She often designs a plan to make sure that she starts early but she always finds excuses for not sitting at her desk and working. Sometimes she even prefers doing the housework to working on her assignments. She gets really frustrated with herself and promises never to do it again but each time it is just the same.

Your advice:

Comments on scenarios

Students like Jason and Hannah know that they should not work like this. They often just scrape through with a minimum pass, although occasionally get a reasonable mark. They know they are capable of better quality work and higher grades and often resent the stress they place on themselves.

Furthermore, with more complex assignments and increasing workloads in later years they know they must change these patterns if they wish to cope with their work. Frequently they feel that they are not in control of their lives and become very anxious. They would like to be in more control and have more self-discipline.

Your advice to them might include some of the strategies listed on pages 28-32.

- b) Reflect upon your own experiences with procrastination. Do Jason's and Hannah's work patterns seem very familiar to you? While reflecting on the main difficulties that you experience with completing tasks on time and with putting off starting your work, consider some of the following questions.
- i. Why do you procrastinate and put off starting some tasks?
 - ii. How often does it happen? [] everytime you sit at your desk?
 [] fairly often?
 [] rarely?
 - iii. What strategies do you use when you can not get started? Which ones can you recommend?

Some Causes of Procrastination

Identifying the causes of procrastination is a difficult task. There appear to be many overlapping aspects. Students talk about:

- having no self-discipline
- being too easily tempted by alternative activities
- being lazy
- not wanting to miss out on doing other things
- finding it impossible to motivate themselves until they have no choice
- not learning other work patterns because they could get away with leaving things to the last minute at school
- not being able to estimate how long a task will take them to complete, frequently underestimating the time required

Whatever the cause most students would prefer a more efficient and less stressful way of organising their studies.

⌘ Exercise 2

Read the list of some of the causes of procrastination below and indicate which ones are typical of you. Can you think of others?

- no established study routine or work patterns
 - poor self-discipline - an inability to say 'no' to alternative and tempting activities
 - low levels of motivation
 - poor concentration (see Booklet 2 Part 2 for strategies)
 - poor understanding of your work patterns and of task requirements; i.e. underestimating how much time and effort is required to satisfactorily complete a task or sub-task
 - other
-

The strategies you develop will relate to particular causes. Let's consider strategies according to the causes identified above.

⌘ Exercise 3

Read the strategies presented below and indicate by ticking which one(s) you feel might work well for you and you would like to practise.

Strategies to help you establish a study routine or work pattern

- Strategy 1 Associate sitting at your desk with serious work and study (not with wasting time), i.e. do something straight away.

Do you waste time when you first sit at your desk (e.g. by doodling on the page or getting up to make a cup of tea)? This is a learned pattern of behaviour. You have learned a connection between sitting at your desk and wasting time. With persistence you can 'unlearn' this and replace it with a new association - the connection between sitting at your desk and serious work. This will take some time to change - like changing all habits - but it is worth persisting with.

Remember - if you find yourself wasting time or day-dreaming, do it somewhere else. Only sit at your desk when you are working efficiently and with concentration.

Strategy 2 [] Have a plan.

Every time you sit at your desk you should know what you want to achieve in that session, what your priorities are and how long you have. In this way you will be setting goals and prioritising them. See Booklet 2 Part 1 for setting goals and Booklet 3 Part 3 for writing a sessional plan.

This is also linked to Strategy 1 since you can do something straight away with a plan in front of you. When should you write your plan? See Strategy 3 below.

Strategy 3 [] At the end of each study session prepare for the next one.

Make writing your plan the last activity for each study session. This might consist of listing the tasks and subtasks that you want to complete or formulating questions that you need answers to. The aim is for you to know where to start when you next sit at your desk and there is no excuse for procrastinating. You can start straight away.

The end of a study session is the best time to write your plan because you know where you are up to, that is, what you have completed and what you still must complete. If other work turns up meanwhile you can add it to your list and change your priority ratings.

Strategy 4 [] Develop a routine.

Most students prefer to have a work routine so that they function at a more automatic level. Without having to think about it they start each session with the same activity and this then gets them going for the whole session.

Suggestions for starting each session include: revising that day's lecture notes, recalling the main points of your last study session, doing mathematical calculations, and so on.

Strategies to help you increase your motivation and self-discipline

Strategy 5 [] Start with some particularly easy or interesting aspect.

This can be a very valuable way to help you get started. The first activity is work that is stimulating and interesting and you may find that once you have got started you can move onto other work more easily.

However, some students like to start with their least favourite activity in the knowledge that once this is completed they can look forward to working on something they really enjoy as a reward.

See what works best for you.

Strategy 6 [] Throw yourself into the project energetically and enthusiastically.

Can you talk yourself into feeling enthusiastic about something? Self-talk is a useful skill. It usually requires you to prepare yourself for study some time before the starting point. It involves thinking about and saying to yourself that you will study soon, you are looking forward to it and will enjoy (some aspect of) the work. Be specific about the task and the particular aspect you enjoy.

Practised over a long period of time, positive self-talk can help change your attitude to study so that study does not seem such a chore.

Strategy 7 [] Give yourself rewards.

Giving yourself a reward for the successful completion of a task or a study session (that is, series of tasks) helps you feel in control and can increase your level of motivation.

Choosing the right reward is important. Choose a reward that you will really enjoy, so that it helps to motivate you and helps you to say 'no' to another tempting activity. You can even use the alternative activity as a reward for completing a set amount of work. One student bought a CD at the end of each successful week of study (not too expensive and she built up a good collection slowly). Think of something you would really like and will work for **you**. It can be small and used to reward each task completion or larger and reward your efforts for a session or a week.

You must not, however, give yourself the reward if you have not achieved your goal. This is very important. This strategy will fail if you give yourself the reward anyway.

Strategy 8 [] Have a balanced and healthy life.

Make sure that in your normal week you organise your lifestyle so that you get a balance of activities, both academic and non-academic. Spend some time with your friends and family, have hobbies and recreational activities **and** do your academic work. You will not feel as if you are missing out on too much if you organise your life to include many activities.

See Booklet 1 Part 2 on how to organise this.

Strategy 9 [] Seek cooperation from friends and family.

You need some support if you are too easily tempted by other activities. Your friends and family can help here by not tempting you and by supporting your efforts. Discuss this issue with them and discuss ways they can help you remain focussed on your academic work.

Have at least one friend who is also a student. It can be very supportive to know that another friend is doing their academic work at the same time as you, just as it can be very undermining to know that all your friends are out socialising when you are at home studying.

Strategies to help you understand task requirements

Strategy 10 [] Get to know yourself as a learner and your lifestyle.

See Booklet 1 Part 1, Understanding Yourself as a Learner, and Booklet 1 Part 2, Understanding your Lifestyle. It is useful to understand how, when and where you typically work best to maximise your efficiency during your study sessions and in planning your time.

Strategy 11 [] Estimate and monitor how long tasks and subtasks typically take.

Booklet 3 Part 3, The Sessional Plan, practises the skills involved in designing a sessional plan. An important part of this plan is to estimate how long you think each task or subtask will take and then monitor your progress. At first your estimates might be very inaccurate but by being conscious of time and with practice you will find your estimates becoming more accurate. This is an important skill if you are consistently underestimating the time required to complete your assignment tasks.

Strategy 12 [] Clarify task requirements.

Use your resources, for example, staff, fellow students and learning centres, to clarify assessment criteria and task requirements. Most faculties and departments have guidelines available. If you are having difficulty with some aspect of your work or do not understand what is required when preparing an assignment get help quickly. It is important not to let your difficulties or confusion become an excuse for procrastinating.

⌘ Exercise 4

In the space provided below list other strategies that have worked well for you.

How to Implement New Strategies

⌘ Exercise 5

- a) Read the information below from Booklet 2 Part 1, *Setting Goals and Making Changes*, which provides strategies for making changes. Page 11 has been partially reproduced here to remind you of the process.

Strategies for Making Changes

- Start with some minor goals first so that you feel good about starting the process and experience some success straight away.
- Only attempt one major change at a time - if you try to change your lifestyle and too many major study habits overnight you will set yourself up for failure and not make any changes at all.
- Persist in practising the new patterns and do not give up in frustration too early - remind yourself constantly that habits do not change quickly.
- Order the changes in terms of your needs and goals.
- Reward yourself with a tick (and a more tangible reward if you like) when you feel you have made the desired change so that it feels comfortable - you may also wish to record the date since this also allows you to monitor your progress.
- Keep your list handy and visible (e.g. on a notice board above your desk or taped to your desk) to remind yourself of what you have achieved and must still achieve.

- b) Follow the steps below in order to make the desired changes.
- i. Reflect on the causes of your procrastination and the strategies suggested for dealing with them.
 - ii. List (on Table 2.5) all the strategies that you believe will help you deal with your procrastination and that you intend to practise.
 - iii. Rank them in the order that you will implement them, keeping in mind the strategies for making changes given above (for example, start with a minor change).
- c) When you have completed Table 2.5 note here again the first strategy that you intend to use to avoid procrastinating.

Table 2.5 Your plan for dealing with procrastination

Strategies	Priority Ranking

Keep in Mind

1. Making plans can end up being part of the procrastination process. Do not spend too long on planning and goal setting. It is possible for this process to become an excuse for not starting your work, that is, for procrastinating.
2. If you are *really* not in the mood, do not try to study. Leave your desk so that you do not have an association between sitting at your desk with non-work - just relax for a short time and try again later. However, this should also not become an excuse to procrastinate.
3. Not all the suggested strategies above may work for you. Practise those strategies that you feel will help you overcome your problem with procrastination. Persist long enough to ensure that they become new habits.

SUMMARY OF BOOKLET 2: PART 3
Dealing with Procrastination

1. Identify the causes of your procrastination.
2. Identify the strategies that will help you deal with your procrastination.
3. Select and practise one major strategy at first.
4. Change your study behaviours gradually.