



The University of Sydney

Learning Centre

First Year Experience Series:

Understanding Yourself

Karen Scouller



First Year Experience Series: Understanding Yourself

Scouller, Karen, *First Year Experience Series: Understanding Yourself*
ISBN 1 86487 443 0

© 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 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

Introduction to Booklet 1

Understanding Yourself

Booklet 1 looks at ways to help you use your private study time more effectively. It focuses in particular on you as a learner and how, when, and where you like to study and on aspects of your lifestyle that enhance and/or inhibit your efforts to study and complete all your work.

It aims to encourage you:

- to reflect upon yourself as a learner and on your lifestyle
- to identify changes you would like to make
- 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <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 	<p>Booklet 1 Part 1 - understanding yourself as a learner</p> <p>Booklet 1 Part 2 - understanding your lifestyle</p> <p>Booklet 2 Part 1 - setting goals and making changes</p> <p>Booklet 3 Parts 1-3 - designing planners and plans</p> <p>Booklet 2 Part 1 - setting goals and making changes</p> <p>Booklet 2 Part 2 - improving concentration</p> <p>Booklet 2 Part 3 - dealing with procrastination</p> <p>Booklet 3 Parts 1-3 - designing planners and plans</p>
<h3 style="text-align: center;">Feelings</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <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 	<p>all the booklets will add to your feeling more confident, more in control, less anxious, and less guilty</p>



PART I

UNDERSTANDING
YOURSELF AS A
LEARNER

PART I

UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF AS A LEARNER

OBJECTIVES OF PART I

After you have completed this section we hope that you will

- understand your patterns of working
- have identified your strengths and weaknesses as a learner
- have identified changes to be made

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

In this section you will have an opportunity to reflect upon the way you typically conduct your private study sessions. This overview of your work patterns and organisational skills includes such aspects as when, where and how you study, and how you deal with unexpected situations.

As a learner you do not want to spend all your time studying. Nor do you want to be over-organised so that every minute of your life is planned. It is important that you understand yourself as a learner so that you can design a flexible plan that is workable for you and that allows you to use your study time efficiently.

⌘ Exercise 1

Reflect on the learning styles and study habits you have developed and ask yourself the following questions.

- a) Where do you study most effectively?

Make sure that you have a study place that you are in control of. It is important that your study sessions are not interrupted and your study materials can be left undisturbed. It is also a good idea to have alternative work places to turn to when you need a break from your usual spot or you need an escape because of short-term interruptions (for example, a party nextdoor). Alternative study venues may include the local library, university library, a friend's place and so on.

b) What times of the day and/or evening do you work most and least effectively?

Most:

Least:

How do you use this information when organising your study times?

It is useful to consider these times when planning your study programme. It is recommended that you do your most intellectually challenging academic work (for example, understanding new and abstract material) when you are at your most alert and efficient and your least challenging tasks (for example, writing a bibliography, filing and organising tasks) when you are not functioning at peak levels.

Most people describe themselves as either being a *morning* or a *night* person. That is, some people are really alert at 5am and can use this time very effectively. Others are hopeless in the morning but work well in the evenings (and sometimes late into the night).

Use your understanding of these natural patterns to your benefit. *Morning* people should use those early hours (for example, working 5 - 7.30am across the week days gives you 12.5 hours) for private study time which allows you freer evenings.

c) What interruptions are most likely to occur during a study session? How do you deal with them?

Anticipate, and if possible eliminate, potential interruptions *before* you sit down and study. For example, if your study session is likely to be interrupted by:

- a. telephone calls take the phone off the hook or turn on the answering machine
- b. drop-in visitors put a "do not disturb" sign on your door or in more extreme circumstances go elsewhere (e.g. study in a library)
- c. outside noise use ear plugs
- d. sound of TV use ear plugs or go elsewhere (see b.)

d) Do you lose concentration a lot during private study sessions? What are the main causes? How do you deal with concentration loss? Are your strategies effective?

Effective study requires good concentration otherwise you are wasting your time and affecting your leisure time as well. Your aim should always be to optimise the time spent in study so that you can enjoy your leisure time without feeling guilty.

Briefly, good concentration requires

- a. knowing what you have to do, that is, have a plan
- b. being actively involved in your study, for example, take notes when reading
- c. anticipating and eliminating interruptions
- d. having breaks
- e. being and feeling well, that is, eating healthy food, getting enough sleep and getting a good balance between university and non-university activities.

Booklet 2 Part 2, Improving Concentration, provides more in-depth reflection on this topic.

e) Do you give yourself breaks? What do you typically do in your breaks? How long are they? Is the time used effectively? Do you find it hard to return to your studies after a break?

Most people can not concentrate really effectively for more than about 50 minutes. Having a break of 5-10 minutes in every hour is an important part of effective study.

Choosing an appropriate break activity is also important.

Don't choose an activity that:

- a. makes returning to your desk difficult, for example, sitting in front of TV and then watching the entire programme; or making a phone call which goes on for an hour,
- b. is a continuation of your study activity, for example, reading a book or newspaper.

Choose an activity that

- a. is an alternate behaviour and is in your control to end quickly, and
- b. rejuvenates you; for example, do some stretching or physical exercises, have a brisk walk, get some fresh air if your room is getting stuffy and so on.

- f) Do you work more effectively in short periods or do you need longer periods for serious work? How do you prepare yourself for long periods of serious study? Is it effective?

Study in the most effective way for you. Mentally prepare yourself and have a plan for each study session so that you can get started right away. If you prefer longer periods of study time then make sure this is taken into account in your plan.

- g) What is your preferred learning style? Are you primarily a visual or auditory learner? How do you organise yourself to gain maximum benefit from your preferred learning style?

Everyone has a different mode of learning. It is worthwhile reflecting on your own preference and then setting up your study sessions so that you can maximise the benefits. In general people seem to be either primarily visual (including text-based and graphic materials) or auditory learners, although there are other learning styles as well.

Visual learners take in information quickly from texts, make written summaries of material and may draw diagrammatic representations of information, such as concept maps.

Auditory learners put and listen to information on cassette tapes, and may listen to tapes of their lectures as revision (if recorded and available).

- h) Do you use timetables/plans to organise study and other commitments?
If you do, are they: [] semester?
[] weekly?
[] daily/sessional?

Planners and plans are the building blocks of good time management. It is essential to *know* and *monitor* what you have done, what you still have to do and how much time you have available to do it in. This requires both long-term and short-term planning.

Booklet 3 Parts 1, 2 and 3 develop and practise these planning skills.

- i) Do you set goals for each study session? How do you do this?
-
-

Setting goals is a very important element of being in control of your life and time. These include personal and academic goals, and long-term and short-term goals. They all inevitably interact and influence each other, with the strength of each goal and its importance to you varying during your years at university.

Focussing on short-term academic goals is important when drawing up a plan for each study session. Your plan will consist of a list of realistic goals to be achieved in that session.

Booklet 2 Part 1 allows you to reflect on your goals and practise setting them.
Booklet 3 Part 3 practises drawing up a sessional plan.

- j) Do you prioritise your activities for each session so that you know exactly what is essential for you to complete and what tasks are less important? How do you do this?
-

Your goals should be prioritised. This can be done either by

- a. ranking activities according to the order you wish to complete them (see Booklet 2 Part 1, Setting Goals and Making Changes, for practice at doing this)
- or
- b. giving each task a priority ranking
 - 1 = must be done
 - 2 = should be done
 - 3 = would be nice to do if there is time.(see Booklet 3 Part 3 for practice at writing a sessional plan and prioritising activities)

These strategies of setting goals and prioritising them aid your concentration, put pressure on you and allow you to be in control of and monitor the study process.

- k) Would you describe yourself as a self-disciplined person? In what ways are you disciplined and not disciplined when it comes to academic work?
-

Some self-discipline is an essential requirement of good study habits. You have to be prepared to say 'no' sometimes because the academic work is your priority at that time.

Briefly, organising yourself in the following ways should aid your self-discipline:

- a. have plans and set goals and prioritise them,
- b. anticipate and eliminate possible interruptions,
- c. have a good balance between your university and non-university commitments, and
- d. work efficiently during your set private study times and then enjoy your leisure activities without feeling guilty.

See section on self-discipline in Booklet 2 Part 3, Dealing with Procrastination.

- 1) Are you well organised? How do you organise your lecture notes, tutorial/laboratory notes, notes taken from readings (e.g. text books or reference books), notes gathered for assignments, such as essays or reports, and so on?
-
-

Having a filing system provides immediate access to material when needed. Although it may seem time-consuming to set this up, study patterns such as being organised and knowing where everything is, allow you to feel in control and save time in the long run.

Suggestions are:

- a. organise (or possibly buy) some system of storage (for example, a filing cabinet or box files or lever arch folders) and a number of manilla folders,
- b. label the subsections of your storage system according to your subjects / courses / tasks (as preferred),
- c. within each subject or course:
 - i. label and organise the following materials: course outlines, assignment lists, reading lists, lecture notes, tutorial and/or laboratory notes, lecture handouts, additional notes from readings and so on,
 - ii. group together those materials that you feel should be together,
 - iii. create as many categories as required and seem logical, and
- d. file materials away at the end of each day - do not let them accumulate.

You may have developed your own system for organising your materials that works for you. If this is the case - do not change it totally - it may be best to think of ways to make what you are currently doing more efficient rather than take on a whole new system of organisation. You might also like to think about whether it is useful for you to put information on computer database systems.

There are many ways of organising university materials logically, and whatever system is used, you should set it up early in the semester. Start with a limited number of categories and add further subcategories as the need arises and materials accumulate.

⌘ **Exercise 2**

Look back over your responses to the questions above and note down below:

- a) your strengths as a learner, that is, those aspects of your learning style and study habits that you feel are effective and working well for you;

- b) your weaknesses, that is, those aspects of your learning style and study habits that you feel are ineffective and you would like to improve;

- c) which sections you should do next to help you develop more effective study and organisational skills. On Table 1.1 overpage list the booklets/parts that you would like to complete and rank them in the order that you wish to do them.

Table 1.1 Future skills development

Skills	Booklet / Part	Rank



PART 2

UNDERSTANDING
YOUR LIFESTYLE

PART 2

UNDERSTANDING YOUR LIFESTYLE

OBJECTIVES OF PART 2

After you have completed this section, we hope you will

- have an overview of your lifestyle
- understand those aspects of your lifestyle that interfere with your study commitments
- identify behaviours and patterns that you would like to change

INTRODUCTION TO PART 2

In this section you will monitor a typical academic week so that you can understand where your time goes and which activities absorb most of it. It is important to have an accurate picture of your use of time in order to manage it well.

Getting Information about your Lifestyle

⌘ Exercise 1

- a) Keep a record on Table 1.2 (overpage) for a few days or a week on how you use and/or misuse your time. Do not spend too much time filling this out - choose a time that might normally be wasted, such as sitting in a bus/train. Be as accurate as you can by recording hours and minutes.
- b) At the end of the week look for patterns and ask yourself the following questions. Tick the appropriate boxes:

	Yes	No
a. Am I distributing my time appropriately?	[]	[]
b. Am I spending too little time on my university studies?	[]	[]
c. Am I spending too much time on any non-university activity?	[]	[]
d. Am I spending too much time on my university studies?	[]	[]
e. Am I wasting too much time?	[]	[]

Table 1.2 Weekly diary

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Time%
Formal classes								
Private study								
Relaxing/socialising								
Domestic chores								
Family activities								
Physical exercise								
Travelling								
Sleeping								
Eating								
Paid work								
Other								
Time Wasted								

[Adapted from Maddox, H. (1988) *How to Study*, Pan Books Ltd., London.]

Comments on Exercise 1b

If you have ticked [yes] for

- a. you have achieved a good balance across your many commitments and interests
- b. and c. - and these may be related - you need to continue on to Issue 1 below
- d. - this is less common - you may need to improve aspects of your study skills, for example, read more efficiently, set goals and prioritise them, or improve your concentration
- e. you need to continue on to Issue 2 below

Two issues will be followed up here:

1. spending too little time on your studies (and too much time on a non-university activity)
2. wasting too much time

Issue 1: Spending Too Little Time on Your Studies

If you are spending too little time on your studies you need to reflect on why.

- It may be that your non-university commitments are too time-consuming, for example, you may be spending too much time on socialising and recreational activities.
- You may have to support yourself (and family) and therefore be required to spend more hours than you wish on paid work.
- Your family commitments may be such that they interfere too heavily with your studies.

From your diary you have an opportunity to identify where your time is going and consider what you will do about it.

Your aim is to get a balanced life. You want to be able to fulfil your academic commitments, your non-academic commitments as well as have leisure time.

⌘ Exercise 2

- a) List on Table 1.3 the activities that are taking you away from your university studies. Are they essential, for example, paid work? Can you reduce the amount of time required? Write in the current number of hours taken up by each activity and the preferred number of hours. If you can eliminate the activity altogether then the preferred number of hours is zero. Otherwise estimate the number of hours you should be spending on this activity in order to fulfil your university commitments. Be realistic and honest in your estimations.

Table 1.3 Non-university activities

Non-university activities	Current no. of hrs per week	Preferred no. of hrs per week
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

- b) Reflect on your social and recreational activities and consider if and how they may be interfering with your studies. Which activities do you find hardest to say 'no' to - spending time with friends / partner, parties, movies, eating out? What support networks do you have to help you say 'no'?

Activities

You need to be able to say 'no' when a tempting activity comes your way. When you consider planning your week (see Booklet 3 Part 2, The Weekly Plan: Organising Your Week) include social and recreational activities so that you do not feel like you are missing out entirely and ensure some flexibility in your plan so that you can occasionally enjoy spontaneous activities. But do not overdo it and make sure you are keeping up with your university commitments so that you can enjoy your leisure activities without feeling guilty.

Support Networks

You need a support network. It is a good idea to have at least one friend who is also studying at university - someone you can work with or you know has to complete the same or similar assignments to yourself and is studying at home when you are.

If you feel that there are too many interruptions (for example, drop-in visitors and telephone calls from your friends) then think of strategies to help you deal with them. See Booklet 2 Part 2, Improving Concentration, for some suggestions. One useful strategy is to discuss this issue with your non-university friends and family members so that they can support not undermine your efforts to fulfil your university commitments.

Issue 2: Wasting Time

⌘ Exercise 3

On Table 1.4 below:

- list your 4 most frequent time-wasters,
- identify how much of your time they currently waste, and
- note down strategies to reduce them.

Table 1.4 Time-wasters

Time-wasters	Amount of time wasted	Strategies to reduce time-wasters
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

Wasting your time is obviously an inefficient use of time. This does not mean that you do not have any leisure time or that every minute of your life must be accounted for. Most people do not like to be overly organised. However, when you have many university (as well as non-university) commitments with deadlines ahead then the way you organise and use your time becomes an important component of success.

Your aim should be to use your time wisely and give yourself some flexibility when planning how you will spend your time. This means that you cannot afford to have too many long lunches or long telephone calls with friends, although this can be a nice occasional treat.

When you identify the main wasters of your time, you have the opportunity to reflect on whether and what you would like to change and to think of strategies to help you reduce the amount of time you waste.

For example, if watching too much TV is one of your time-wasters (it is the most common one) - how can you reduce this activity? Some suggestions include: allowing yourself to watch your favourite shows (a limited number please) by including them into your plan so that you do not feel that you are totally missing out. And signal the end of the TV watching session by putting on a timer (an alarm clock will do) which is left in your study area thereby forcing you to get up and leave the TV room in order to turn it off. Once out of the room the behaviour pattern of watching TV is broken. A strategy used by another student is to watch her favourite show standing up so that she does not get too comfortable and can easily leave when it is finished.

You need to develop strategies that will work for you.

Your Action Plan

⌘ Exercise 4

In the space provided below write your plan of action. That is, list the changes you want to make to your lifestyle so that you can achieve a good balance of university, non-university and leisure activities. Consider both the non-university activities that take up an excessive amount of your time and your main time-wasters.

Changes to be made:
