



Section 4



Academic skills



4.1 Differences between high school and university learning

Think about

*What do you think it will be like to study at university?
How were you taught in high school? How will you be
taught at university?*



How much studying will you have to do?

? What do you think?

Complete the table below showing the differences between studying at high school and at university.

	High School	University
1.		<i>You are in control of your learning</i>
2.	<i>Most learning hours are in the classroom</i>	
3.	<i>Teacher-led</i>	
4.	<i>Teachers give you all the information you need</i>	
5.		<i>Learning involves analysis, thinking critically, and drawing your own conclusions and opinions</i>
6.		<i>Teaching takes place in lectures, seminars and tutorials</i>

To do well at university you will need to develop effective study skills and strategies. At university you need many skills, ranging from personal skills such as the ability to communicate with your peers and tutors, to technical skills such as using word processors and the internet.

There are also a range of academic skills you will need. These help you to understand the content of your course and to produce assignments to the standard expected at university. These include:

- Reading
- Note taking
- Essay writing
- Preparing and giving presentations
- Research – both internet and library
- Exam taking
- Time management
- Group work

This section will provide you with an introduction and tips on each study skill.

4.2 Attending lectures, tutorials and seminars



Think about

How did your teacher teach you in high school?

What did you do in the lessons?

How do you expect to be taught at university?

Lectures

In lectures the lecturer will talk on a given topic, perhaps with the use of visual aids such as PowerPoint or a white board. Students listen and take notes. Lectures are much longer than the lessons in high school. Lectures are usually two or three hours long.

To take best advantage of lectures you should keep up with the course reading.

Lecturers will discuss and, where appropriate, criticise the topic, rather than simply describe what the topic is.

They may distribute handout material that will give you an idea of what the lecture is dealing with or what points they wish to draw to your attention.

The lecture can be used for a variety of purposes:

- to provide an introductory overview of the subject
- to stimulate the students' interest in a particular topic
- to impart basic information about the key points relevant to the topic
- to focus on and examine in detail a particularly difficult point, concept or theory
- to explain and review different ideas or theories

In lectures it is important to strike a balance between listening and understanding the material which is being presented, and making notes. There is little value in writing down every word spoken by the lecturer if you have not understood what has been said. An incomplete set of notes can be supplemented by reading the recommended books.

Tutorials and seminars

Seminars provide an opportunity for you to get to know some of the members of staff and therefore to develop a more personalised contact with the department.

They also provide a method of obtaining informal feedback from students about the course - the seminar is the obvious forum within which to voice positive views or complaints.

From the educational viewpoint seminars can be used:

- to explain new or difficult ideas
- to allow you to practice techniques of problem-solving
- to help develop your communication skills
- to relate different parts of the course to one another
- to provide feedback on your writing skills
- to identify and resolve any misunderstandings you may have

Seminars require active participation by students. You should be prepared to contribute in seminar discussions, and raise issues for discussion or raise points you do not understand.

Seminars provide an opportunity for you to discuss interesting and difficult aspects of the course and therefore gain a better understanding.

How to get the most from your lectures, tutorials and seminars:

1. Find the books

- All tutors issue reading lists for their courses, and will expect you to do some reading for every lecture, seminar or tutorial. Plan to do the reading in advance, as you may not be able to find the books the day before.
- Articles in journals can be just as valuable as books, as they often include summaries of current thinking on topics.

2. Focus on the topic

- If the tutor has asked a question as preparation for a seminar topic, work out an answer as you read. Don't worry if you're not sure if it's the right answer.
- Note key words that frequently occur. What exactly do these words mean and how are they being used?
- Make a list of the points you want to raise and the questions you want to ask in preparation for your next tutorial or seminar.

3. Listen actively and effectively

Does your mind wander in lectures? Do you worry about whether you understand enough? Are you unsure about which points are the most important?

- To get the most out of lectures, tutorials and seminars you have to engage in active and effective listening. Here are some tips to help you:
- Try to do some background reading on the topic before your class, so you have a better idea what to expect and what questions you would like answered.
- Sit towards the front of the room, so you can hear the speaker and have a clear view of any visual aids. Avoid distractions, such as a window, a talkative neighbour, or your mobile phone.
- Set aside your own views, prejudices or opinions. You may already have your own view of the topic. Set this aside, and listen to what the speaker has to say. After the lecture, you may want to review these ideas.
- Focus on the speaker. You will listen more attentively if you are watching the speaker.
- Respond to questions and directions. Encourage the speaker and signal your interest in what they have to say.



Check your understanding

Complete these sentences in your own words:

1. A lecture is ...
2. A seminar is ...
3. To get the most from a lecture I need to ...
4. To get the most from a seminar I need to ...
5. To avoid distractions I should ...
6. I must contribute in seminars by ...

4.3 What is critical thinking?

Think about

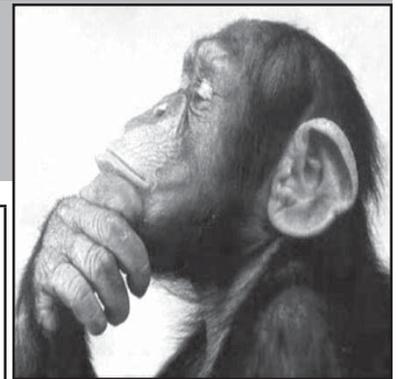
What is critical thinking?

Did high school teach you to think independently?

What are the benefits of being able to think independently?

Critical thinking is best understood as the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking.

*Elder, L. and Paul, R. "Critical thinking: why we must transform our teaching." *Journal of Developmental Education*, Fall 1994*



Critical thinking is a term which is consistently used by academics in explanations of what is required by students in their university work in order for their knowledge and skills to evolve. But what is critical thinking?

Critical thinking differs in relation to the context and situation. Our understanding of critical thinking in everyday life will be different to an academic's understanding of critical thinking at university.

Critical thinking in everyday life

Critical thinking is something you frequently do in your everyday life when you manage, plan and make decisions; it is not something that is foreign to you or something that you do not know how to do yet.



Check your understanding 1

Look at the everyday activities listed below. Which of them involves critical thinking? Tick the relevant boxes.

Everyday life activities	Involves Critical Thinking	Does NOT involve Critical Thinking
<i>Feeding your family on a low income</i>		
<i>Choosing courses at University</i>		
<i>Brushing your teeth</i>		
<i>Moving to a new home</i>		
<i>Deciding between several job offers</i>		
<i>Arranging to travel to another country</i>		
<i>Jogging</i>		
<i>Travelling from A to B with time and budget constraints</i>		

Critical thinking at university

The word ‘critical’ is commonly thought to have a quite negative meaning, for example, finding fault with someone or something. At university, however, ‘critical’ has a broader, more positive meaning: being critical involves making independent judgments and evaluations.

Making judgments can involve distinguishing between fact and opinion or evaluating the validity of information or theories. These judgements need to be based on research and consideration of all possible viewpoints.

Critical thinking is very important to academia because this is the main way that knowledge is added to a field of study. While academics may agree with the conclusions of a particular piece of research, these conclusions may open up other questions which need to be answered.

Only through constantly questioning, “what if?”, “how could?” or “what does this mean for...?” can new knowledge be added to a field, allowing for the constant development of academic subjects. Critical thinking is a desirable skill in ALL aspects of university work.

A critical thinker:

- asks relevant questions
- assesses statements and arguments
- is able to admit a lack of understanding or information
- has a sense of curiosity
- is interested in finding new solutions
- listens carefully to others and is able to give feedback
- sees that critical thinking is a lifelong process of self-assessment
- looks for evidence to support assumptions and beliefs
- can see connections between subjects
- is able to adjust opinions when new facts are found
- looks for proof
- is intellectually independent



Check your understanding 2

Write if you think these statements are true or false:

Critical thinkers:

- believe everything they are told
- create their own opinions
- are not afraid to say they do not understand something
- always have a strong opinion
- never change their views
- look to support their beliefs with facts
- never question their teacher
- are in control of their own learning
- learn through memorisation only
- are always seeking to understand new things

True or false

4.4 General reading skills

Think about

What books did you read in high school?

Do you enjoy reading?

What do you expect to read at university?



In high school the main purpose of reading was to improve your ability to read or to gain knowledge. Now that you are at university the material you read will be much more difficult, plus you need to be able to analyse the content of what you are reading.

To read effectively you need to be able to adapt your style of reading according to the reason for reading and the difficulty of the text.

Scanning, skimming and analytical reading

Scanning is the fastest form of reading. Scanning is when you look through a passage, or book very quickly. You are not reading the passage or book; you are looking for particular words or information.

You would scan when you want to find specific information. You would also scan indexes and contents.

The next type of reading is **skimming**. When you skim read you read a passage quickly. You don't need to understand every word, or stop to look up words in the dictionary. You are just trying to get a general idea of what the passage is about.

The third type of reading is **analytical** reading. This type of reading is much slower. You are trying to understand most of what the writer is saying. You have to think carefully about what you are reading. There are many techniques to help you practice reading analytically. We will look at analytical reading in more detail.



Check your understanding

At university, when would you need to use:

1. Scanning?
2. Skimming?
3. Analytical reading?



Practice

Select a piece of text, or an extract, in English, about one page long.

1. Scan the text looking for proper nouns – names of places, people, organisations etc.
2. Read the text through once, quickly. Without looking at the text, note down anything you remember from the text.
3. Read the text through again, slowly. Try to understand as much of the text as you can. Ask yourself: ‘What is the text about?’, ‘What is the main point the writer is trying to make?’, ‘What are the important details in the text?’.

4.5 Techniques for analytical reading

Main ideas, important details and summarising

When you are reading analytically you should identify the main ideas and important details of the texts. Summarising the information into your own words will also help you to understand and remember what you read.

The **main idea** is what the text or paragraph is about. Imagine you have to explain what the paragraph or text is about in only one sentence – this is the main idea.

The **important details** are details that support and give information about the main idea. You need to decide which details are most important. It helps to highlight, underline or list important details.

A third way to help you understand a text is by **summarising**. Here you need to explain the paragraph or reading in your own words (not copying). Doing this makes you think carefully about what you are reading and helps you to remember the information.



Practice 1

Practice reading some paragraphs from books you have. For each paragraph, write down what the paragraph is about in only one sentence, using your own words.

Now practice reading each paragraph and identify the important details.



Practice 2

Read the following text and answer the questions below.

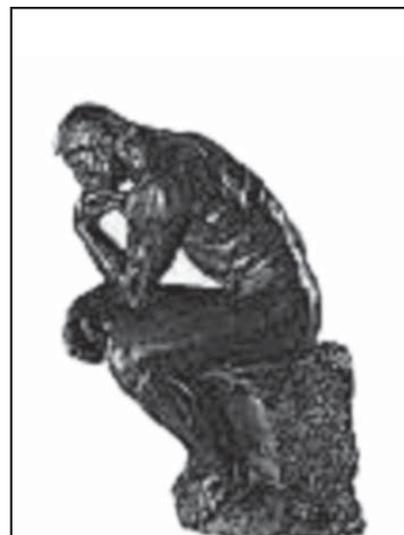
Critical thinking is the ability to think clearly and rationally. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking. Someone with critical thinking skills is able to understand the logical connections between ideas, identify, construct and evaluate arguments, detect inconsistencies and common mistakes in reasoning, and solve problems systematically.

Critical thinking is not a matter of accumulating information. A person with a good memory and who knows a lot of facts is not necessarily good at critical thinking. A critical thinker is able to deduce consequences from what he knows, and he knows how to make use of information to solve problems, and to seek relevant sources of information to inform himself.

Critical thinking should not be confused with being argumentative or being critical of other people. Although critical thinking skills can be used in exposing fallacies and bad reasoning, critical thinking can also play an important role in cooperative reasoning and constructive tasks. Critical thinking can help us acquire knowledge, improve our theories, and strengthen arguments. We can use critical thinking to enhance work processes and improve social institutions.

Good critical thinking might be seen as the foundation of science and a liberal democratic society. Science requires the critical use of reason in experimentation and theory confirmation. The proper functioning of a liberal democracy requires citizens who can think critically about social issues to inform their judgments about proper governance and to overcome biases and prejudice.

(<http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/>)



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1. What is the main idea of the passage?
 2. What are the main ideas of each paragraph?
 3. Imagine you have to write a paragraph about 'the qualities of a critical thinker'. Write down the important details that you would need to put in the paragraph.

Active reading

Active reading means you think about and analyse what you are reading. Instead of just reading and accepting information, you decide whether or not you agree with what is written and draw your own conclusions.

It is important to be able to read actively since at university you will find that different authors, writing on the same topic, will have different views. No one can say which views are right or wrong. You have to decide which view you agree with.

To read actively, keep in mind a number of questions, such as:

- What is the topic of the book or reading?
- What issues are being addressed?
- What conclusion does the author reach about the issue(s)?
- What are the author's reasons for his or her statements or beliefs?
- When was the book written? Does it reflect the views of its time?
- What does the book / reading leave out?
- Is the author using facts, theory, or faith?
- Why do you, or do you not, accept the arguments of the author?

SQ3R

SQ3R is short for: **survey – question – read – recall – review.**

- Survey:** Survey the text – look at the heading, chapter information, details about the author, date it was written, illustrations and graphs.
- Question:** Ask yourself why you are reading this text. What do you already know? What do you want to know? Does this material support / supplement / contradict what you already know?
- Read:** First, skim read the material; look for the main ideas and general structure of the text. Then read for the purpose of making notes on the main points. Make notes in your own words instead of copying. Look for answers to the questions you first raised. Reduce your speed for difficult passages - stop and re-read parts which are not clear. Read only a section at a time.
- Recall:** Can you recall the key points without re-reading the text? Recall helps you to concentrate, and to make your reading active rather than passive. Ask yourself questions about what you have just read, and/or summarize in your own words what you read. Underline / highlight important points you've just read.
- Review:** Look back at the text to check your recall. Have you missed anything of importance?

This may seem like a lot of work, especially when you have a lot to read in a short time, but it really will help you to understand and remember what you have read.

4.6 Note taking

Think about

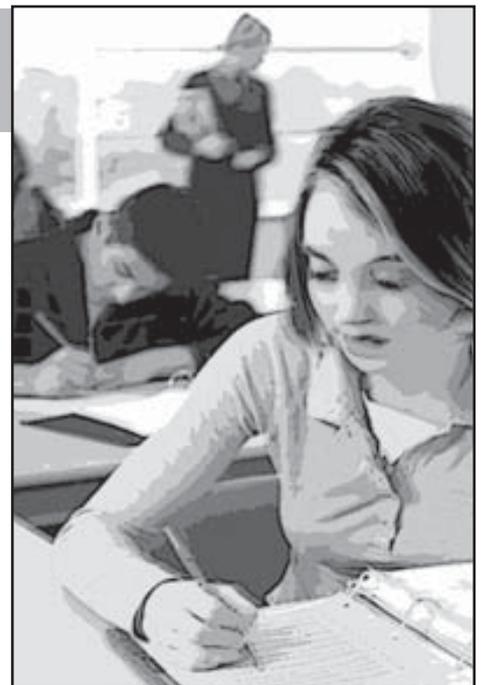
*Did you ever take notes in high school?
Why do students need to take notes?*

At university you are expected to take your own notes from lectures, tutorials, books, articles, reviews and other sources. These notes form the basis of all your work: it is from them that you will prepare seminar papers, write your essays and research projects, and revise for exams.

Taking good notes is an essential skill for university students to develop, a skill which will prove equally useful after graduation.

How to take notes

There is no one “correct” way to take notes. We all develop our own way of taking notes, and very different approaches can be equally effective. Whichever technique you employ it is important not to let note-taking become a slow, boring and passive form of learning.



Below are some do's and don't for taking good notes.

Don't:

Copy out sentences or passages verbatim.

Copy a mass of factual information.

Do:

Be neat.

Use headings, numbered points, and highlight in different coloured inks.

Leave large spaces (for amendments and additions)

Use abbreviations/shorthand (but spell out personal or place names)

Note fully the author, title and other details of all works consulted, including page numbers where relevant, so you can find the information easily again.

Note-taking formats

1. Outlining

The most common, and probably easiest, form of note-taking is by jotting down information with the notes structured as a sequence of headings with indentations and dashes - a little like an essay plan. It creates a well-organised set of notes, which are easy to review.

The notes should be jotted down sequentially, following the order of the lecture or book. Major points are written to the left. Indent more specific points to the right, with increasingly specific points farther to the right. Indentations could be dashed, or labelled with numbers.

Note - This is difficult to do if the lecture is too fast.

Examples:

Dams

- Benefits
 - produce hydroelectricity
 - store water for irrigation and drinking
 - prevent flooding
- Problems
 - displacement of people
 - loss of livelihood
 - damage to environment
 - deforestation
 - harms river life
 - drought downstream of dam

Study skills – November 17

Reading

A. Reading styles

1. Scanning

Fastest

Used to find specific words / information

2. Skimming

Slower than scanning

Read passage quickly

Get main idea of passage

3. Analytical

Slower

Understand the passage

Read more than once

B. Techniques for analytical reading

1. Main ideas, important details, summarising

2. Active reading

3. SQ3R

2. Cornell Note-taking System

This format is a good way to encourage you to review your lecture notes. It can be very useful when preparing for exams.

You need to use an A4 or large notebook. Prior to the lecture divide your page into two vertical columns; the left-hand column is one third of the page wide. This column is for recall.

During the lecture, record your notes in the right-hand column.

After the lecture, read through your notes. Use the left column to jot down any key ideas or words from the lecture. Re-read the lecturer's ideas and record your responses to these ideas (in your own words).

It is always recommended that students reread their notes after a lecture or seminar, but many students lack the self discipline to do this. Maybe this technique would encourage you to do so.

Write key words and ideas here after the lecture	Write your lecture notes this side during the lecture
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Organising your notes

It is important to have a good system for organising and storing your notes. You will need to develop a filing system that suits your needs. When it comes to writing your essay or revising for an exam, you do not want to be wasting time sorting through a large pile of papers.

Some tips on organising your notes:

- *Use a separate file for each subject area.*
- *Use file dividers to separate major topics.*
- *Arrange your notes under headings or questions.*
- *Number and label pages so that you can re-file them easily.*
- *Use separate notebooks for each subject.*

Taking notes from written material

You need to ensure that your note-taking encourages you to read texts in an active way. It helps if you have a question or set of ideas to direct your reading (such as a seminar or essay question).

You need to have some idea of what you are looking for in a reading.

When reading you should be constantly asking yourself questions and note down what you need to remember.

Tips for note taking from written material:

- *Always make a note of the reference details (author, title, date of publication etc.) and page numbers before you start to read.*
- *Write in your own words – don't copy.*
- *Be discriminating. Note down what is important, NOT all the information.*
- *Read critically. Think and note down any objections you have to the arguments presented.*
- *Write your notes in your own words, add comments and reactions.*
- *If you own the book or if you are working from a photocopy, highlight and underline key ideas as you read. You can write your response to these ideas in the margins of the text. (Do not do this if you are reading a library book!)*
- *Focus on the introduction and conclusion to the text. These often place the text in context and summarise the main arguments.*

Improve your note-taking strategies in lectures and seminars.

- Arrive on time! Often the subject is introduced and the outline of the lecture is set out at the beginning of the lecture. If you miss this, you may spend the rest of the lecture trying to work out what is going on.

- Make sure you are an active listener. Active listening is a thinking activity. The more you think about the ideas you are noting down, the more you will understand and remember them at a latter date.
- Develop a flexible note-taking strategy, which can be adapted to suit the style of the lecture.
- Review your notes after the lecture. You should think about how your lecture notes relate to your notes from the course readings. Look out for the developing themes of the course, and think about how this lecture relates to the previous lectures in your course.



Practice

Find a piece of writing, either in a book or on the internet that is related to the major you are interested in.

Use the outlining method to practice taking notes on the piece of writing.

4.7 Writing essays

Think about

Did you have to write essays at school in Myanmar?

How did you write the essays?

How do you think writing essays at university will be different from at high school?

When you study at university you will spend a lot of time writing! You will be asked to write essays, research papers, and plan presentations. The writing that you produce will count towards your final grades.

Essay structure

A well structured essay will contain an introduction, the main body of the essay, and a conclusion. It will be well organised with clear points and arguments. The body of the essay will be divided into paragraphs and each paragraph will focus on a specific point or argument.

There are a number of different ways to structure an essay; the example below is a basic essay structure:

Introduction	General information Thesis statement
Body	P1 Topic sentence Supporting sentences
	P2 Topic sentence Supporting sentences
	P3 Topic sentence Supporting sentences Etc.
Conclusion	Summarise main points Final comment / opinion



The **introduction** is the first paragraph of an essay. It introduces the topic (what the essay is about). The introduction also gives some general background information about the topic. It also has one sentence which tells the reader specifically what the essay is about – the main idea of the passage. This is called the thesis statement.

*

The **thesis statement** tells the reader the main topic of the essay. It is usually the last sentence of the introduction.

*

The **body paragraphs** make up the main part of the essay. Each paragraph should be about a specific topic and it should be clear what the topic of each body paragraph is.

You should include a **topic sentence** in each body paragraph; it is often the first sentence of the paragraph. A topic sentence states the main idea of the paragraph. The rest of the paragraph would give information to support the main idea.

*

The **conclusion** is the last paragraph of the essay and it summarizes the main points of the essay. It usually finishes with a final comment from the writer, expressing his or her thoughts or opinions. Do not add any new ideas in the conclusion.



Practice 1

Read this sample essay, and answer the questions below.

1. People who travel around the world will experience many different cultures and lifestyles. These lifestyles range from the very modern, luxurious way of life in western countries, to the poverty and despair of millions of people in poor countries. Despite the global belief that all human beings are equal and deserve a decent standard of living, there are many differences in the lifestyles of rich and poor.

2. One big difference between rich and poor is housing. In developed countries people live in nice houses, with plenty of space, and air-conditioning or central heating to maintain a comfortable temperature in the house. Bathrooms and kitchens have hot and cold running water and the houses are clean, with good sanitation and ventilation. In contrast, for those living in poverty housing is very different. Large families are crowded in to small, one room houses. Often these houses lack bathrooms and kitchens. People living in these houses are vulnerable to hot and cold weather, and to the diseases spread by mosquitoes or by poor sanitation. For some, even this kind of house is an impossible dream. Around the world thousands of homeless people sleep every night on city streets.

3. Another difference in lifestyle between the wealthy and the poor is diet. The wealthy have enough to eat, and people can visit restaurants and eat the traditional foods of many different countries. They are also able to afford nice clothes. Many people eat too much food and as a result become unhealthy and develop obesity. While the wealthy suffer the diseases of obesity, the poor suffer the diseases of malnutrition and starvation. Unable to afford enough food to survive, millions of men, women and children are malnourished, and 3 million children die each year because of a lack of food.

4. A third difference between the lifestyle of the poor and the wealthy is consumerism. The wealthy can afford to buy many luxury goods, purchasing new clothes, shoes, electrical goods, cars and luxury holidays. Billions of dollars are spent every year purchasing unnecessary goods. But for those living in poverty possession of luxury goods is not possible. In many countries children are dressed in rags, while their parents struggle to find enough money to meet their basic needs. Poor people do not have access to good health care.

5. So, it can be seen that there is a huge gap between the lifestyles of the rich and the poor. Part of the world's population lives with excess, while millions of others struggle to survive. While some suffer from obesity, others die of starvation. Clearly, the belief that all human beings are equal has yet to become a reality.

1. Under line the thesis statement.
2. Underline the topic sentences in paragraphs 2, 3 and 4.
3. Underline the final comment from the writer in the conclusion.
4. Paragraphs 3 and 4 each contain a sentence that is not relevant to the topic of the paragraph. Underline these sentences.



Practice 2

Match the topic sentences to the paragraphs below.

1. Improving sanitation is an important way to reduce many diseases.
 2. Primary health care uses preventative rather than curative methods to promote health.
 3. Primary Health Care not only improves health, but also reduces the expenses of curative health care.
 4. Primary Health Care teaches people in the communities to take control over their health.
- a. Unlike conventional medicine, which focuses on curing diseases, Primary Health Care aims to stop the diseases from occurring. Preventative methods include improved sanitation, improved living conditions, and health education. Most importantly, primary health care seeks to teach the people how to stay healthy. Through this method the incidences of disease are reduced, and so is the need for curative health care.
- b. Poor sanitation means a dirty living environment, which can be caused by a polluted water supply, rubbish, or unclean cooking facilities. Poor sanitation causes illnesses such as diarrhoea and vomiting, and diseases such as dysentery and gastro-enteritis. Bacteria and parasites cause these illnesses, and improving sanitation reduces the bacteria and parasites in the living environment.
- c. Instead of being dependent on doctors and medics, the people can take action to improve their health. By improving their living environment and sanitation people can reduce the incidences of intestinal diseases in the community. Understanding the causes of mosquito borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever helps the community to take measures to protect themselves. Knowledge of nutrition and the importance of a healthy diet informs people of the food they should eat to stay healthy.
- d. Medical health care can be very expensive. Medicine and medical equipment cost a lot of money. Patients often need to stay in hospital, or in clinics, and people must be employed to care for them. By improving health, Primary Health Care reduces the number of patients needing curative health care. So, primary health care can reduce the cost of health care.



Practice 3

Here are four topic sentences, and a list of supporting sentences. Match the supporting sentences to the topic sentences. One has been done for you.

Topic sentence	Studying in a foreign country brings many benefits.	An educated population benefits society.	It is important to consider many factors when choosing a university major.	There are many stages to the university application process.
Supporting sentences				a

- a. Next you need to submit the application form and relevant documentation.
- b. Learning about other cultures helps you to expand your world view.
- c. They also have better analytical and thinking skills.



Practice 5

Below is a sample essay, with some parts of the essay missing. Fill in the blank spaces (thesis statement (1), topic sentence (4), supporting sentences (5), and write a conclusion (6).

1. *Around the world the importance of education is increasingly being recognised. Greater numbers of young people are completing high school, and more and more are aiming for higher education in colleges or universities. Though both high school and university have valuable roles to play in educating society, the educational experiences each offers vary greatly.* _____
_____.

2. *The first difference is teaching methods. High school learning is very teacher centred and takes place in lessons where a teacher imparts information to a class of students. Students listen, ask questions, and are given activities and exercises to help with their learning. At university, on the other hand, learning takes place in lectures and seminars. Lectures are talks given to a large number of students who listen and take notes. Seminars are student centred discussion groups where students are able to reflect on what they are learning.*

3. *Another difference is the style of learning. At high school the teacher guides the students and provides them with all the information they need to learn. At university students are only given part of the information they need. They are expected to find out the rest themselves. Learning in high school is very much based on memorisation, while at university students have to analyse and question the material they are learning.*

4. _____ *High school aims to impart information and knowledge to students which the students are expected to understand and remember. University takes learning one step further and expects students to analyse and think critically about what they are learning. Instead of simply remembering what they have learnt university students must draw their own opinions and theories.*

5. *Student responsibility is another difference between high school and university.* _____

6. _____

The stages of essay writing

Writing is a process. There are many steps to producing good written work. The steps below will give you an overview of how to write an essay.

Step 1 **Generating and organising ideas**

When given an essay topic to write don't just sit down and start writing. Take time to plan your essay first.

The first step is to generate ideas of what you want to include in your essay. You could try listing ideas or making a mind map. You need to write down all the ideas that are in your head. At first don't worry if they are right or wrong, you can go back and edit them later.

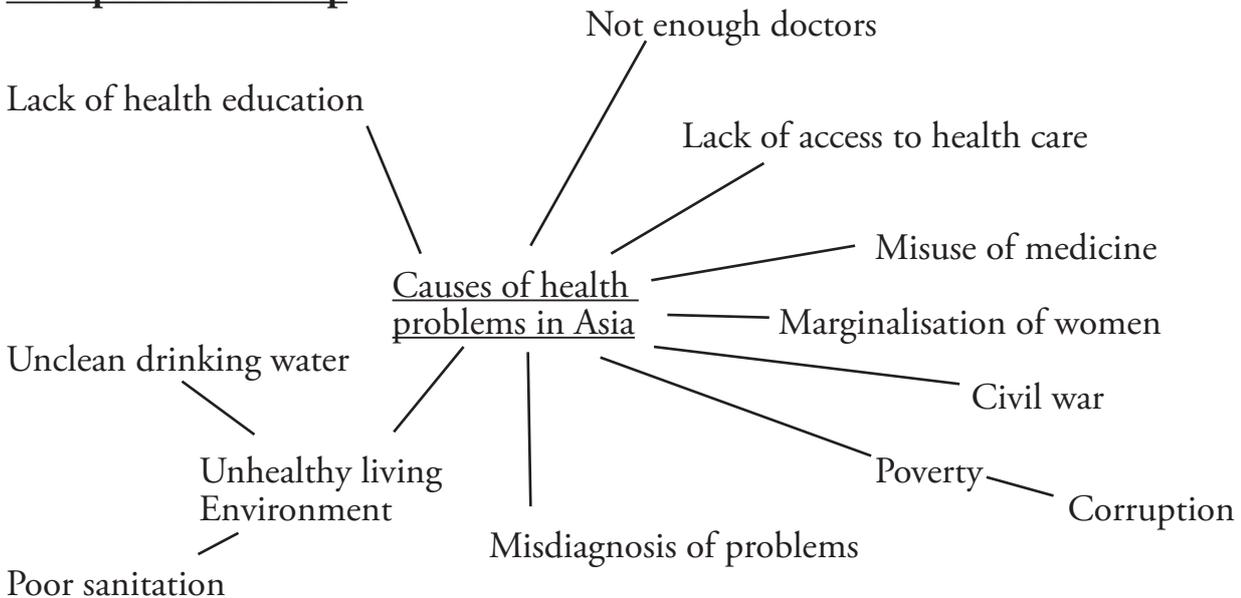
Techniques for generating ideas include writing lists or creating a mind map. See the examples below:

Example 1: List

Causes of health problems in Asia

Mosquitoes
Lack of health education
Lack of health care
Not enough doctors
Not using mosquito nets
Lack of access to medicine
Misuse of medicine
Poorly ventilated living conditions
Pollution
Misdiagnosis of problems
Poor sanitation
Dirty drinking water
Marginalisation of women
Poverty
Civil war
Corruption

Example 2: Mind map



Once you have written down all your ideas, you need to try to organise them. Are some of your ideas related to other ideas? Can some of your ideas be put together under broader topics?



Practice 6

The ideas in the list and mind map above can be organised into broader topics. Match them to the topic areas below. Can you add any new ideas?

1. Living environment
2. Lack of resources
3. Political
4. Social

Step 2 Research

When you are writing a university essay you need to research your topic to gather as much information as possible. This could be facts, theories and statistics. You will get better marks for your essay if your lecturer can see that you read up thoroughly on the topic you are writing about.

The information you use should all be referenced (see plagiarism below).

Producing and organising your ideas before you start researching will help you decide on the specific topics to research. You can research both on the internet and in the library and use journals and articles as well as books.

Step 3 Essay plan

Writing a good essay is not just about the information you include in your essay; it is about the way you organise the information.

Now you need to review the information you have collected, organise it, and create an essay plan. An essay plan is an outline of your essay.

You need to decide what each paragraph of your essay will be about. What will the topic sentence for each paragraph be? What information should you include to support the topic sentences?

You don't need to write full sentences in the essay plan, just notes that tell you what you are going to write. See the example below:

Example:	
<i>Introduction</i>	- Brief overview of main health problems in Asia. <i>Last sentence: This essay will discuss the causes of common health problems in Asia focusing on living environment, lack of resources, political and social causes.</i>
<i>Paragraph</i>	- Living environment - poor housing and sanitation, poor ventilation, dirty water, pollution, rubbish, What health problems are caused? Statistics
<i>Paragraph</i>	- Lack of resources – poor countries Reasons for not enough clinics, doctors, medicine – examples from specific countries Effects of lack of resources
<i>Paragraph</i>	- Lack of resources – difference between city and rural areas Statistics Differences in main health problems between city and rural areas Why do rural areas have less access?
<i>Paragraph</i>	- Political – how does political situation in various countries effect health? Civil war, corruption, mismanagement - examples
<i>Paragraph</i>	- Social – how do social factors affect health? Poverty, marginalisation of women, lack of education - statistics
<i>Conclusion</i>	- Summary of main points Final comment

Step 4 First draft

Now you can begin to write your essay. Write or type up a first draft.

Step 5 First edit

After you have drafted your essay read it through. Ask yourself:

What is plagiarism?

Plagiarism is the use of other peoples' writing or ideas in your assignments without properly referencing their work. While universities in Asia are currently not very strict regarding plagiarism, universities in the West consider it to be a very serious offence. In the West plagiarism can lead to punishments such as failing an assignment or a course. In severe cases of plagiarism the student may be expelled from the course.

Plagiarism can take several forms, both mild and severe. For example, a student may copy some sentences from another source into their essay, or write the sentences in a slightly changed form, and this would be viewed as mild plagiarism.

Severe plagiarism would be when a student copies whole paragraphs, or even submits an entire article as his or her own work.

How to avoid plagiarism

If you use anyone else's work it is important that you reference this work so that credit is given to the writer.

- If you copy a sentence directly, you need to put it in speech marks, with a reference. Graphs, drawings and statistics all need to be referenced.
- If you write someone's ideas in your own words you again need to reference. Be sure you really write in your own words, and don't just copy the text changing only a few words.
- DON'T cut and paste chunks of someone else's writing into your essay. Referenced or not, this will not be what your tutor wants to see.
- Definitely DON'T submit an entire article as your own work.

Basically you must reference whenever you use someone else's ideas, theories, opinions, statistics, drawings, graphs, websites or quotes. You might reference many sources in one assignment.

How will the university know if you are plagiarising?

With so much information available in books and on the internet you might think that you can safely copy someone else's work, and your tutor will never know. In reality it is likely your tutor WILL know when you are plagiarising because:

- Your tutor has spent far more time researching your field of study than you. It is unlikely you will find a source that your lecturer has not read. And maybe you are not the only person in your class using that source.
- Your lecturer is also familiar with your style of writing, and can tell if some (or all) the assignment has been written by someone else.
- Lecturers may submit work to an on-line plagiarism detector.

How to reference

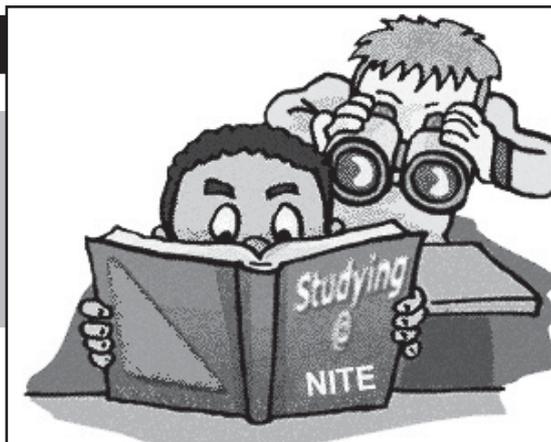
Different universities may have their own requirements for referencing. But in general you need to give the surname of the author and the page number of the source in brackets, in the text of your assignment where you refer to their work.

You then need to list all sources giving source title, author, publisher and date printed, or the website address if your source came from the internet, in a bibliography at the end of the assignment.

4.9 Developing internet research skills

Think about

Have you ever used the internet to research for information? How do you search for information on the internet?



The internet is a great source of information. On the internet you can access up to date articles and discussions covering a range of views. Some sites require you to pay to access information, but a lot of sites are free and a valuable source of research for your assignments.

Tips for researching on the Internet

Before you begin searching the internet you need to have a clear idea of what kind of information you are looking for. Successful internet searches depend on you using the appropriate keywords. Keywords are words related to your topic that you type into a search engine to help you find the information that you need. Using keywords that are too general could give you thousands of sites to search through.

Before you search consider the following:

- What information am I looking for?
- What words best describe what I am looking for?
- Would it be better to use a search engine or subject gateway?

How do I search the Internet?

There are 3 primary ways to search the internet:

1. Search engines:
Search engines enable you to search using keywords. The most popular search engine is <http://www.google.com>.
2. Metasearch engines:
These are search engines that allow you to search across a range of search engines. For example, <http://dogpile.com> will allow you to search across Google, Yahoo, MSN, Ask.com and others. However, although you should find more material, it may be difficult to sort through the material to see what is most relevant to your topic.
3. Subject gateways:
These are lists of WebPages divided into subject areas, for example, <http://www.intute.ac.uk>. Subject gateways provide you with a list of websites recommended by experts.

What do my results mean?

Once you have done a search on the search engines you will have a long list of WebPages or 'results' or 'matches'. You then have to find the material that is relevant to you.

Remember:

The most relevant information should appear at the top of the list.

Reading the information given with each match should help you decide if the information might be useful.

Using an advance search can help to narrow the search and reduce the amount of information listed.

Changing keywords may help your search if the keywords you used didn't bring up the right results.

Advanced searches allow you to narrow your search. For example, if you use Google's advance search you can search for exact phrases, omit results containing unwanted words, and search within a specific site. This should help you to get less, but more relevant, results.

URLs

Every page on the web has an individual address or URL (Universal Resource Locator). The URL can be helpful in deciding if a webpage is relevant to your search, as it provides information about the organisation hosting the site. It can sometimes give you additional clues about the site.

Consider the URL <http://www.intute.ac.uk/artsandhumanities>
www.intute.ac.uk = the Domain (i.e. the organisation hosting the site, see below)
/artsandhumanities = the Directory (i.e. the folder in which the page has been placed)

Domains

The domain names may give you clues about the type of organisation hosting the website and the country of origin.

Some common organisation names include:

- com or co = organisation or company
- ac or edu = education
- gov = government
- org = Non-profit organisations
- net = network providers
- Some country names include:
 - uk = United Kingdom
 - de = Germany
 - fr = France
 - cn = China
 - au = Australia
 - za = South Africa
- Most US pages do not include a country code.



Consider www.intute.ac.uk. The domains tell you that this site is for an education organisation based in the United Kingdom.



Practice

Complete the exercises below to practice searching on the internet.

Using Google

1. Write down the definition of “humanities”.
2. Find a job description of a “project manager”
3. Find websites for three non-profit education organisations in Thailand.
4. Run a search using the words “universities” “Thailand”. How many results do you get?

Now go to advanced search and move “universities” “Thailand” to the exact wording or phrase box, and search again. How many results do you get?

Now move the words “universities” “Thailand” to the one or more of these words boxes, and search again. How many results do you get/

Using Dogpile

1. Run a search using the words “list” “universities” “Thailand”
2. Look at the results. You will find many sites that do not look relevant to what you are searching for (a list of universities in Thailand).
3. Go to advance search and use the none of these words box. Decide which words to enter in this box to narrow your search.

Using Intute

1. Which headings are under the Science, Engineering and Technology subject area of the Intute site?
2. In which subject area would you find psychology?
3. Click on the Virtual Training Suite. Select the major that is of most interest to you, and follow the instructions to learn how you can research your chosen major on the internet.
4. Intute is a UK subject gateway. Run a search on a search engine of your choice to find some other subject gateways.

4.10 Group work and discussions

Think about

*Do you prefer to work alone or in groups?
What are the benefits of working in groups?
What are the benefits of group discussions?*

Your university course will also include group work and group discussions. Sometimes this will involve a project that the group has to work on together, which will be graded and counted towards your final marks.

Some people work well in groups, others prefer to work alone. Sometimes group work can be frustrating, especially if some members of the group are not pulling their weight. However, group work is included because learning to work together is another skill students need to develop.

Group work and discussions should involve everybody. To work successfully in a group, or to participate well in group discussions, you need to be both ready to speak and prepared to listen. People want to hear what you have to say, but you also need to give other people a chance to speak too.

You need to be open-minded and ready to respect different ideas and opinions, even if you might not agree with them. In group work you have to accept that things might not be done exactly as you would like or think is best. You need to be flexible and able to compromise.

Resolving conflicts

Sometimes there are conflicts within a group. This may happen if someone is dominating the group and other people feel they don't have enough input. Or if someone is not pulling their weight, perhaps not turning up to meetings or not doing the work assigned to them.

This can be frustrating, especially if it is group work that counts towards your grades. Ideally a problem like this should be solved by the group. At first the group could politely speak to the person or persons concerned, and try to resolve the problem by talking, and listening. Then give the group member(s) a second chance. Don't complain to the lecturer until the group has first tried to solve the problem themselves.

Remember, learning to solve conflicts is part of learning to work as a group.

4.11 Time management



Think about

How much time do you spend each day working or studying?

How much time do you spend relaxing?

Do you ever need to plan your time?

At university there will be many simultaneous calls on your time. The tutors of each subject you are studying will all be giving you a lot of reading plus setting assignments. Before long you may feel that there are not enough hours in the day.

It is important that you manage your time well to be sure you keep up with the demands of all of the subjects.

How efficiently do you use your time?

How much time do you waste in a day?

We often feel that we are very busy and don't have enough time to do the things we need to do. But if we look carefully at how we use our time we will see that a lot of time is wasted, or that too much time is used relaxing.



Practice

Thang Go found he never had enough time and was always finishing his assignments very quickly the night before they were due. Because of this his grades were low. He decided to keep a diary of how he spent his time. Below is an example of one day.

Time	Activities
6am – 7am	Wake up 7am
7am – 8am	Shower, cook and eat breakfast, go to class
8am – 9am	Lecture
9am – 10am	Lecture
10am – 11am	Lecture
11am – 12	Eat lunch, talk to friends
12 – 1pm	Get books from library, talk to friends
1pm – 2pm	Seminar
2pm – 3pm	Go home, talk to friends
3pm – 4pm	Sleep
4pm – 5pm	Watch TV
5pm – 6pm	Go to shops
6pm – 7pm	Cook, shower
7pm – 8pm	Eat, talk to friends, watch TV
8pm – 9pm	Study
9pm – 6am	Study until 11pm, sleep



1. How many hours did Thang Go spend at university?
2. How many hours did he spend in private study?
3. How many hours did he spend relaxing?
4. How could Thang Go change his day to have more time to study?

Thang Go might have thought that he was very busy, but when he looked at his day he could see that he spent a lot of time relaxing. It would be very easy for him to find more time in the day to study.



Self reflection

Try keeping the diary above for a week after you start at university. Write down how you spend your time during the day.

Planning your time

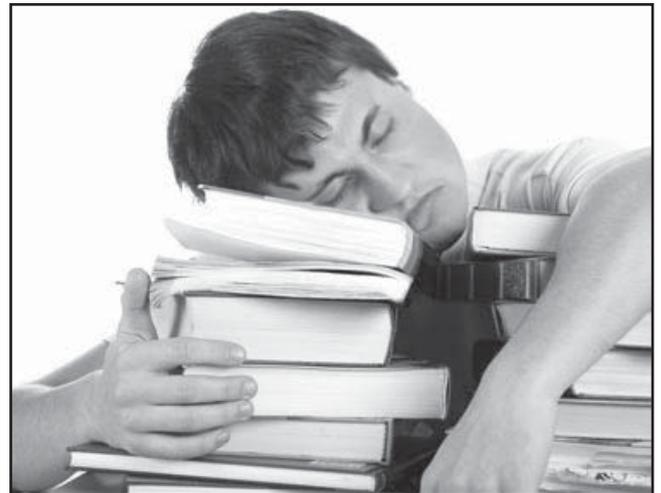
One way to avoid wasting time is to plan your week. For example, Thang Go could plan his day. He could decide that between 12 o'clock and 1 pm he will study in the library, and between 3 pm and 5 pm he will study at home (or in the library if there are many distractions at home).

It is very easy to waste time, particularly if you are sharing a house with several friends. It's more fun to chat with them than to sit alone studying while they talk downstairs. But if you have self-discipline and plan your time well you will find you can do well in your study and have time to relax too.

Semester Planning

At university your tutors may not remind you about assignment deadlines and exam dates. Usually you need to find out this information yourself and remember it. You will have to submit assignments for your different courses at various times through the semester.

Using a year planner, for example a wall-chart, will help you to plan when you need to work on your various assignments.



On a wall-chart mark:

- *the beginning and end of the semester*
- *the crucial dates for submission of assignments and coursework*
- *the dates of the exams period*
- *the numbering of each week in the semester.*

This way you'll have a means of seeing various signs of progress such as: How far through the semester are you? How far through the syllabus for this course-unit are you supposed to be? How long is it until the exams? What proportion of the books you intend to read have you got through so far? How much longer until your research project needs to be submitted?

And hopefully you won't reach the end of the semester with piles of work to do, wondering where the time has gone!

4.12 Preparing a presentation

Think about

Have you ever had to give a presentation or speech in front of a group of people?

How can you make a presentation or speech interesting?

At sometime while you are at university you will have to give a presentation. This may be most students' least favourite activity, since they dread speaking in front of their fellow students.

Giving presentations is a valuable skill, and learning to give presentations in front of your peers and tutor is good experience for when you may have to give presentations in your future career.

So, it is beneficial to view presentations as an opportunity to develop a skill that you may well need in the future. Plus, watching your peers' presentations gives you the opportunity to observe common strengths and weaknesses, so that you can further improve your own presentations.

Preparation

Having a well planned and well prepared presentation will give you confidence, however nervous you are.

These steps will help you with presentation preparation:

1. **Brainstorm the topic:**
Write the topic in the centre of a large sheet of paper, and then write down everything you can think of that is associated with it (mind map).
2. **Organise the information:**
Look at everything you have written on the sheet of paper and start to organise it. Which information and ideas belong together? Which information is not relevant to the presentation and can be left out?
3. **Structure:**
Structure your presentation to have a beginning, a middle and an end.

1. *Tell your audience what you are going to talk about and the structure of your presentation. This is effectively the introduction.*
2. *Present the information. It helps to organise the body material into key points as this helps the audience to remember the information. Use visual aids – PowerPoint, DVD, handouts, white board, etc.*
3. *Summarise what you talked about. This is effectively the conclusion.*
4. *Questions: Give your audience time to ask questions.*

Powerpoint

Powerpoint is a popular visual aid used with presentations. Powerpoint is found on most computers, and it allows you to create a series of slides that can be projected on to a screen while you give your presentation.

Using Powerpoint you can show graphs, tables, and illustrations, or you can summarise and highlight important information.

Powerpoint can be very effective if it is used well. This means, if good Powerpoint slides are prepared and used to supplement a good presentation.

Tips for preparing a Powerpoint presentation:

- Don't put all of your presentation on Powerpoint slides. Just put main points
- Concise, bulleted information is easier to read. Use key words and phrases
- Don't put too much writing on one slide as it is difficult for people to read. Put 4 or 5 points per slide maximum
- Don't use paragraphs. They take a long time to read and people will read the slide instead of listening to you
- Don't read from the Powerpoint slides. Information on the slides is there to support and emphasise what you are saying
- Use a colour of font that contrasts clearly with the background
- Use at least an 18 point font. Smaller fonts will be difficult for the audience to read
- Use different size fonts for main points and secondary points
- Don't use too many different colours. It will distract people from the information
- Use a font that is easy to read such as Times New Roman or Ariel
- Proof read your slides for spelling and grammar mistakes

For more tips on preparing Powerpoint slides and a sample of a Powerpoint presentation visit: <http://www.iasted.org/conferences/formatting/Presentations-Tips.ppt?>

Listening to other students' presentations

Think about

*How do you want your fellow students to behave when you give your presentation?
How would you feel if you were giving your presentation and the audience was looking out the window, or at their watches, whispering to each other, or falling asleep?*

The behaviour of the audience can have a big effect on a speaker's confidence. Students have a responsibility to be supportive when their classmates are giving their presentations.

Help your peers by listening carefully to their presentations, showing an interest, and asking some questions at the end. If you are asked to give feedback don't just be negative but comment on the good points too.

Remember, you can learn through listening to others' presentations – not just from the content, but also from observing the way they give their presentation.

Presentation tips

- *Rehearse your talk*
- *Maintain eye contact with your audience*
- *Look and sound interested in your topic*
- *Don't pace or rock backwards and forwards*
- *Speak clearly*
- *Don't rush*
- *Don't just read the information, remember what you need to say with notes to prompt you*

4.13 Taking exams

Think about

How did you prepare for your high school exams?

How much time did you spend revising?

When did you start revising?

Your exam marks are very important to your final grades. You will probably have two periods of exams per semester – mid-term exams and final exams. Make sure you are well prepared for your exams. Find out the exam dates in advance and revise for each exam thoroughly.

- Check and re-check your exam timetable – know the dates, times and where the exams are held. Check in case there are any changes to the schedule.
- Make sure you know what form the exam will take – essay, long answers, multiple choice. Find out how much time you will have; how marks are allocated; and what aspects of the course will be tested.
- Be familiar with what you can take into the exam room; how you have to dress (universities in Thailand require strict uniform on exam days); and how you are to conduct yourself.

Revision strategies

Most students appreciate the importance of revising for exams. But though most students work hard at revision, they often don't work well at it. Revision strategies are important to help you get the most from your revision.

The main purposes of revision are:

- *To organise your notes, essays, handouts etc. into a convenient and coherent set of notes, directed towards the exam.*
- *To understand the topic for which you are sitting an exam.*
- *To practice planning and writing answers to questions.*

1. Revision all year round

Don't leave revision to the last minute, or even to the last month. Try to find time to review topics throughout the year.

2. Good preparation

This is where note taking skills are important. Make sure your notes are easy to read and follow, and are well organised. Keep lists of relevant readings and reference books. Keep a note of everything you need to do.

3. Review past papers or past questions

Practicing answering past questions is a good way to review material and get an idea of how to answer questions. The same questions won't come up again, but you can become familiar with the question style.

How to revise

1. Note taking (See the note taking section.)

Summarise course notes into key points and arguments that are easy to review and remember. Writing things down helps you remember better. Think what might be asked and work out outline answers to possible questions.

2. Answering questions

Prepare model answers to past questions. This will help you remember material, improve your analysis of the topic, and develop your exam taking skills.

3. Memorising

You will need to memorise information, facts and arguments. You will need to decide what the most effective way of memorising is for you. Some techniques are:

- Review your notes three or four times
- Predict what is on a page of notes before you read it
- Review a page, then see how much you can remember
- Produce new briefer notes

A last minute review of your notes can help you – although many people feel that trying to learn new material at the last minute can actually displace material they had already learned.

In the exam

University exams have strict rules of conduct. Breaking these rules can often lead to you being failed or disqualified from the exam. Make sure you are aware of the conduct expected by the university.

Different types of exams

Essays – You may be required to write essays in your exams. This is the most common style of exam at university. Usually there will be one or two compulsory questions, plus a number of other questions where you will be asked to select one or two.

- Always read the instructions. Make sure you know how many questions you need to answer, which ones are compulsory and which ones you can choose.
- Work out how much time you have for each question.
- Read each question at least twice. Think about how the question is phrased – be aware of words such as “compare”, “contrast” and “criticise”.
- Write a brief essay plan before you start writing. Note down all the relevant points you want to make.
- Make sure your essay has a clear introduction. Remember, even in exams having good essay structure is important.
- You will have to write quickly, but pay attention to your handwriting – the person marking the exam needs to be able to read it.
- Remember you have limited time so may have to limit the number of points you can make in an essay. Choose the most relevant.
- Finish with a good conclusion which ties up the points you have raised and how they relate to the question.
- It is the quality of the argument, not the quantity of information that matters!

Open Book Exams - In an Open Book Exam you are assessed on your understanding rather than how much information you can memorise. You can take your books and notes into the exam. You will be given instructions of what you can and cannot take into the exam as this will vary from university to university and faculty to faculty.

Preparation is very important for an Open Book Exam. Having clear and well organised notes will be a big help. Concise notes on the ideas and concepts being tested, plus page numbers of relevant references will help you when you are answering questions in a limited time.

Multiple Choice exams are not widely used in universities in western countries where essay style questions are preferred. However, universities in Asia do use Multiple Choice.

Multiple Choice questions usually include a phrase or question followed by three to five options. If you encounter a Multiple Choice Test you might want to keep the following test strategies in mind:

- Read the directions carefully
- Think about how much time you can spend on each question
- Read the questions and all the choices carefully
- Answer the easiest questions first – this will give you confidence
- If you are not sure of an answer eliminate the answers you know are wrong, then think about the remainder
- Check if you are penalised for incorrect answers (some tests may do this to prevent guessing)



Remember:

- *Check that you are sitting the correct exam! – This sounds obvious, but it does happen that students have the wrong room or the wrong time.*
- *Read the exam instructions carefully. Make sure you are aware of what is required from you, how many questions you need to answer, the exam time etc.*
- *If you have an essay style exam read through all the questions before you decide which ones you can answer best.*
- *Think about how much time you have for each question to make sure you don't run out of time.*
- *Try to leave some time at the end to check your answers.*