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Study Skills Support tutor and essay examiner



Study Skills FOR **DUMMIES®**

by Doreen du Boulay



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Doreen du Boulay taught undergraduate and postgraduate subject courses in Education and Applied Linguistics, study skills and skills for specific subjects at the universities of Aberdeen, Warwick and Sussex for longer than she cares to remember – over twenty years. She taught students from a range of backgrounds and with many different needs, and wrote the Sussex University study skills web pages.

She was an assessor of pre-university courses for overseas students in British universities for BALEAP (British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes) for ten years, a consultant with the British Council for training courses in Algeria, Poland and Zambia and for Banque Indo-Suez training courses in English for employees. She was seconded by the University of Aberdeen to work in local oil and gas companies with their overseas employees.

Having begun her career as an organisation and methods analyst, she turned to secondary school teaching, first in Zambia, then in Shropshire and Scotland, before becoming a university teacher. She has always benefited from having several feet, centipede-like, in several camps – as a subject tutor, skills tutor and course assessor, and working in industry – and has always tried to pass on insights from this mixture of experience. She took early retirement due to vision problems and now works freelance.

Dedication

To Zoe, Jan and Huw, my children: always an inspiration.

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Introduction

Welcome to *Study Skills For Dummies*! So, what are study skills, and why do you need them? Read on. While your subject of study is concerned with *what* you learn, study skills are to do with *how* you learn. Study skills help you use the content of your course as efficiently as possible, so that you get the most out of the efforts you put into your work. They provide you with a basic toolkit of resources to select from and apply to any situation, and each new situation gives you more practice and more confidence in yourself. The skills you practise at college or university will also stand you in good stead in the world of work afterwards. They can help you, for instance, present yourself well at interview, network effectively or challenge with confidence the small print in contracts or other documents.

For most people, going to college or university is their first experience of independence and it can be daunting as well as exciting. For this reason, in this book I take a broad view of study skills so as to include wellbeing as a basic requirement for fruitful studies. The people you meet and interact with, as well as being a joy in themselves – or a problem to solve – contribute to your learning process and skills development. Good students are lively, chatty and well-rounded people who learn from each other as well as their tutors.

About This Book

Study Skills For Dummies aims to help every student get the most from themselves and their studies. Not by burning the midnight oil in a garret and forsaking everything and everyone else – far from it. This book explains some of the reasoning behind how things work in the academic world, the duties and responsibilities of students and their tutors and how and where to seek out answers when something is not clear to you. Knowledge is power and helps to put you in charge of your learning.

The book offers practical strategies to help you use your time effectively and avoid stress, with suggestions for particular tasks like understanding essay titles and taking notes. Regular preparation, followed by discussion or self-reflection on what you've learned or how your views have changed in the light of these experiences, are the bedrock of your learning experience. This process of revisiting what you've learned strengthens not only your memory for information – a great help later on, when the exams come round – but also your own ideas and views. It also helps you construct your arguments in favour of your views: this process is central to your academic development.

In other words, wherever possible, this book shows you how to kill at least two birds with one stone, but you can dip into any chapter and find practical suggestions for solving the problems or tackling the tasks at hand.

Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate through this book, I've set up a few conventions:

- ✓ *Italic* is used for emphasis and to highlight new words or terms that are defined.
- ✓ **Boldfaced** text is used to indicate the action part of numbered steps.
- ✓ Website addresses appear in `monofont`, so that they stand out on the page.
- ✓ Sidebars (the grey boxes you come across from time to time) are extra background information that you can take or leave.

What You're Not to Read

Because this book is about putting you in charge so that you can easily find what you need, I've also made it easy for you to identify 'skippable' material. This stuff, although interesting and related to the topic at hand, isn't essential for you to know:

- ✓ **Text in sidebars:** The sidebars are fun, and you'll learn from reading them, but they aren't essential reading. They share anecdotes, examples or background information only, although I hope they are helpful.
- ✓ **The stuff on the copyright page:** Save your time. You should only read what you need to and there's nothing here of any interest, even if you're doing a publishing degree.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I've assumed that one of the following is true about you.

- ✓ You are in your last year of school considering embarking on a course of study at college or university.
- ✓ You have already started a course at college or university.
- ✓ You are returning to education after a break to take a higher degree and need some revision.

- ✓ You are taking a Foundation course instead of 'A' levels.
- ✓ You want the best value from your investment (both financial and physical) in education at university, and you want to know how to get it.

How This Book Is Organised

Study Skills For Dummies is divided into six parts, with each part broken into several chapters. Each chapter is, in turn, broken up into several sections. Each part brings together related material. The table of contents gives you more details of each chapter.

Part I: Study Skills Basics

This part introduces you to the nitty-gritty of being at university telling you about the overall set-up, academic requirements, how things work and how you can develop the basic tools you need to be a successful student. Here's where you find out about critical thinking, and those essential ICT skills you have to have in modern college education.

Part II: Becoming an Active Learner

One thing you need to get straight from the start is that a college or university education is not something that just happens to you. It's something you do. Active learning is about asking questions of the information you are taught, and using your critical skills to transform simple facts into understanding. This part covers the various sorts of learning experience you are going to become accustomed to, from intimate seminar groups to lectures in which you might be one of a hundred or more participants. It also stresses the two-way nature of education, accustoming you to the idea of seeking and giving feedback.

Part III: Gathering Your Evidence

This part deals in detail with an area which might be relatively new to you: independent research. At college or university you are in control of your own learning. Part III takes you through all you need to know about acquiring the raw material for knowledge and understanding. I tell you how to find the information you need, where to find it, and how to go about incorporating it into your own work.

Part IV: Getting It Down on Paper

Being able to express your views concisely in writing is a key skill for any student, almost regardless of which course they are on. The chapters in this section show you how to structure your written work effectively and how to use the sort of language appropriate to academic communication. They also stress the key principles of academic communication: honesty, clarity, relevance, and reality. Whether you're writing lab reports or a dissertation, this part shows you how to get your thoughts down in the most efficient way you can. Writing is about showing what you know and using that as a basis to find out new things – about yourself as well as your subject. Just as poems and whodunits have an expected form, so does academic writing. This part helps you to base your ideas in academic 'fact' and be creative.

Part V: Final Reckoning: Surviving (And Enjoying) Exams

Even if you're studying a subject where a large component of your final grade is made up of coursework, the chances are that you'll have to sit exams at some point. This part deals with understanding exam questions, tips for remembering detailed information and advice on making the exams period as enjoyable as it possibly can be. If you prepare properly for your exams, there's really nothing to worry about, and this section shows you how to develop the confidence to sail through with flying colours.

Part VI: The Part of Tens

It's a *For Dummies* book, so there must be a Part of Tens. The chapters in this section offer chunks of sound advice to enhance your experience of student life. I talk about how to maximise the time you have available, how to work *and* have a good time at university, and finish up with ten great ideas for making your essays stand out from the crowd.

Icons Used in This Book

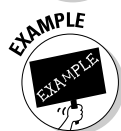


The icons used in this book help you to find different kinds of information that may be useful to you.

This icon highlights practical advice to make study skills work for you. Tips are the inside info you need to make the most of your study time.



This icon is a friendly reminder of important points to take note of. Carry these away with you, and you won't go far wrong.



You'll find this icon beside real-life instances of the particular topic I'm discussing, to help you get a grip on the issues.



The ideas and information you'll find next to this icon tend to be a bit more technical or mathematical than the rest of the book. I'm not saying the info isn't interesting, but don't get bogged down in it. You can still get the big picture, so feel free to skip this stuff.



This icon marks things to avoid or be wary of. If you see this icon, steer clear of whatever it is I'm warning you against.

Where to Go From Here

For Dummies books are organised so that you can dip in practically anywhere. You don't have to start at Page 1 and keep going until the index. In fact that isn't a great idea at all.

Having said that, it might be an idea to start with Part I, which really does cover the basics of student life. After that, the world – or at least the book – is your oyster. Use the Contents Pages and the Index to find the stuff you really need and want to know about. And enjoy!

Part I

Study Skills Basics



In this part . . .

So now you're a student. What do you do now? This part gets you up to speed on the essentials of student life. In it I cover the people and places you need to know, the ways in which you need to organise yourself and both your responsibilities as a student and those of others towards you.

I also talk about the very basic skills you need to acquire to be a successful and engaged student. Not just the techie stuff, although I cover that, but the crucial skills of critical and analytical thinking which underpin your time as a student – and set you up for life.

Chapter 1

Planning for Success

In This Chapter

- ▶ How course elements fit together – who’s who and what’s what
- ▶ Reviewing rules and behaviour
- ▶ What’s in store and taking control
- ▶ Balancing work and leisure

A very exciting phase in your life is about to start – new teachers, new classmates, new things to study about your chosen subject. If you’re away from home for the first time, you need to work out new strategies to get yourself up on time without the person or pet that used to perform that function. You’ll discover, sadly, that the washing fairy who used to transform piles of discarded clothes into sweet-smelling, smoothly ironed wearable articles is a myth – or didn’t accompany you to your new address. You’ll learn a lot about yourself. You might turn out to be a highly talented omelette maker, write the best essay on fluoridisation and freedom in your study group or score a hat trick at hockey, a sport you never played at school.

Some things you can do nothing about, like not growing another six inches if it’s not in your genes. However, there are plenty of things you can improve by developing strategies and planning, and the good thing about planning is that it doesn’t take very long. You can do it in small doses, and it can make a big difference. In addition, planning will save time so that you can have more fun, and some planning will itself be fun and certainly a lot more interesting than watching paint dry. Knowing how to do things – having good study skills – is just as important as knowing what’s what!

Getting to Grips with Student Life Basics

When you arrive at your college, you will normally be given a student information pack which will include:

- ✓ General information about student life at your particular university or college, such as:
 - A campus map
 - Significant term dates
 - Information about the library
 - Details of shopping and banking facilities
 - An introduction to the sports centre
 - All you need to know about the health centre
 - Information on campus safety and security
 - A guide to the Students Union
 - General academic rules and regulations relating to exams, handing in work late, and plagiarism
- ✓ Specific information about your course, including:
 - The names of tutors, (note your year tutor in particular)
 - The academic school office that deals with your subject area
 - Contact numbers and emails for help and support
 - The term or year programme of topics for each course of study
 - The recommended reading, probably on a weekly basis
 - The methods of on-going assessment
 - The dates of examinations

A lot of the information is useful to consult as the need arises, so keep it safe. In study terms, your timetable for the term is your road map showing how much of your time is structured by the formal elements of your course. The weekly elements consist of timetabled classes, ranging from wholly taught lecture courses and seminars (which probably include contributions from class members) to workshops and laboratory work, which may take the form of supervised group or individual work. Each class will be allocated a particular room and tutor. If you are lucky, your weekly timetable may be set out for you by your subject office. If not, the school office will give you the code numbers for the classes you have to attend so that you can find the time, place and tutor from the overall room allocations timetable, normally available in the reception area of most campus buildings or with the porters.

Finding your way around

The academic department in which you study may be part of a *school* or a *faculty*, depending on which is the preferred term in your university. The school (faculty) or department office will supply you with a blank timetable so that you can fill in your classes and don't need to carry all the room bookings information round with you.

You also need the campus map (ask the school (faculty) or department office for one if you aren't given one). This should at least give you the building names or numbers, if not the room numbers. Room numbers are usually allocated like for hotel rooms – 102 means first floor room 2, and 210 second floor room, though this may vary. Lecture theatres usually have a name or code to indicate what they are and seminar rooms may just have a building code or name and number. See Chapters 5 and 6 for more on lectures and seminars.

Take your timetable and campus map and spend an hour or so finding all the rooms you will use or visit using the checklist which follows this paragraph as a guide. The teaching rooms can be in different buildings and some distance from your subject home base area, so note the loos and cafes in passing. There is normally a ten minute gap between classes, so knowing where you have to get to when you have one class immediately after another will tell you if there is only time for a loo break, not a coffee break.

- ✓ Lecture theatres
- ✓ Seminar rooms
- ✓ Tutors' offices (get the room numbers from the school office)
- ✓ School office and secretaries or admin. staff offices
- ✓ Common rooms and cafes near the teaching rooms
- ✓ Locker space near teaching rooms
- ✓ Toilets near the teaching rooms
- ✓ Laboratories, including computer labs or *clusters* (groups) of computers available for students to use in open plan areas and the Language lab
- ✓ Main library, departmental library and places for self-study (check opening hours)
- ✓ Students Union offices
- ✓ Student Health Centre
- ✓ Sports centre and gymnasium
- ✓ Shower facilities

- ✓ Lock-ups for bikes
- ✓ University Book shop
- ✓ Student Union and other shops – grocery, launderette, stationery
- ✓ Student bars and Refectory

Checking out who's who

When you have found each tutor's office, check the important information pinned to the door: the time of their office hour and the name of the person who provides their secretarial or administrative support, each with their internal phone numbers and email addresses. This is important information to get in contact or leave a message at short notice, if you are ill or get held up. The teaching staff will be out of their rooms teaching for much of the time, so messages are best left with or at least copied to their secretary, probably working in the school office or nearby. Tutor's office hours are a guaranteed time when tutors will be in their offices and available to students. Find out more about what tutors do in Chapter 2.

**TIP**

Although appointments may not be necessary, it's worth either suggesting a time to call within the office hours (by email or internal phone) in case the tutor is expecting other students. That way, you don't have to wait around. If you can't do that, get there a bit early to be first in line. Your time is just as valuable as your tutor's and an extra half hour in the library might be more useful than waiting outside a door.

**REMEMBER**

Take a book to read just in case you have to wait.

When you have found the teaching rooms, your various subject tutors' offices, their office hours, phone numbers and email addresses, the phone numbers and email addresses of those who deal with their administration, where their offices are located (they might be some distance away from the tutor's) make yourself a 'Who's Who to keep with your class timetable as shown in Figure 1-1. The information on Tutors' doors tends to be the most up to date. Check again at the beginning of the next term in case office hours have changed.

You will note that two tutors who teach you can have office hours at the same time and you may have a lecture at the time of an office hour. However, students are not expected to contact tutors on a regular basis and office hours are arranged for when a tutor is not teaching. If you have a bigger or on-going problem, you should probably contact your year or personal tutor, if you have one. It may also be possible to arrange a different meeting time with a tutor.