How do I learn? Getting the most out of your study time

Lectures, seminars and independent study are all aspects of university which many of you are likely to have had little experience of before. So how can you get the most out of your studies......?

How do I learn? By considering this question you are already on the way to getting more out of your study. If you understand how you personally learn best, you can use this information to organise and plan your study time to suit you. To learn at university is not about simply memorising facts: learning is about gathering information, organising it, understanding it, reflecting upon it, and presenting ideas. Everyone learns differently, otherwise we would all find exactly the same things easy to learn or difficult to learn. Did you find it easy to learn to drive; do you like the pressure of exams; do you easily recall debates you’ve had; can you follow a recipe in a cook book? It is likely that most of you will have different answers to these questions. Using your time effectively is not about spending all hours of the day studying; time management is about making sure the time you do spend studying is a rich and engaging experience. When you are an independent learner you are able to recognise and take responsibility for your own learning needs and styles. Try this questionnaire to help you think about your learning style:

If I have to learn something, I learn best when I:
A) Hear someone tell me how
B) Try to do it myself
C) Watch someone show me how

When asked to give directions, I:
A) Have to point, gesture and move my body to give them
B) See the actual places in my mind or prefer to draw them
C) Have no difficulty giving them verbally

I prefer teachers who:
A) Use presentations and handouts while they lecture
B) Talk with expression, pose questions and encourage discussion
C) Use hands-on activities

When trying to concentrate, I have a difficult time when:
A) There is a lot of clutter or movement in the room
B) I have to sit still for any length of time
C) There is a lot of noise in the room

When given written instructions on how to build something, I:
A) Read aloud and talk to myself as I put the parts together
B) Read silently and visualise how the parts will fit together
C) Try to put the parts together first and then read later if I need to

To keep occupied while waiting, I:
A) Walk around, touch things, or fidget my hands and feet
B) Talk or listen to others
C) Look around, stare or read

What does it all mean? Turn over to find out your preferred learning style. It may be that in different situations you prefer to learn in different ways; by being aware of how you learn you can adopt techniques that will enable you to learn the things you need to with more ease. No matter how you learn you should always try to make that learning active; learning is about doing, not simply storing bits of information in the brain! Much research suggests that creative learning is the key to unlocking understanding. You need to gather, organise, understand, remember and use what you learn. Follow some of the tips overleaf to encourage active and creative learning according to your preferred style.
On the face of it  Surface Learning is where you may record bits of information such as dates and names of theories - Deep Learning is when you can understand the significance of this information. An active learning approach, which gets you to continually ask questions and reflect upon the information you require, is designed to move you from Surface to Deep Learning. Good notetaking skills can help you create an active learning ethos. However, many students take pages and pages of linear notes - line by line writing.

Why shouldn't you make lots of linear notes?
- You take so many you are swamped by them and never read them again
- If you miss something, you panic and miss even more
- It is passive - you do not need to think to take linear notes
- All the information looks the same which makes it difficult to recall specific points of information
- They are uncreative so only engage a small part of the brain

How to get the most out of lectures
Always label your notes - Jot down some general questions to have with you in the lecture that will challenge what is being said (Is this always the case? Why is this?) - Listen for clues as to what is coming next (a critique, questions you may be asked in assignments, summary) - A handout doesn’t mean you don’t have to take notes - Flag points in your notes that you do not understand - The more effort you put into your lectures, the more you will get out of them - Pay attention to introductory and closing comments - Read though your notes to clarify points with 24 hours, after which you may have forgotten vital points - Taking good notes aids concentration and the act of writing things down will help you learn

Lectures  Students should listen and note down key points. A lecture is an overview of current information in any academic area but by no means is an 'all you need to know'. You should always prepare before a lecture in order to get the most out of it; it is easier to think reflectively and understand a lecture topic if you have some knowledge of it beforehand. If you are not bogged down with grasping the basics you will find that novel ideas and questions will come to you throughout the lecture.
Ask yourself some questions - what is the topic about? How is it linked to other lectures? Who are the main authorities on the topic? What is the critique?

TIP: You do not have to write down everything the lecturer says! (see above for notetaking tips)

Seminars  Seminars are generally designed to complement lectures. This is the students' chance to think about their knowledge of a topic and discuss their point of view. It may also be a chance to put into practice the theoretical skills and techniques you are learning in lectures. You will be expected to participate in seminars - do not be afraid of this - seminars are often where true understanding takes place as you explore your subject more deeply and learn from your tutors, fellow students and yourself.

Do the reading and reflect upon it! Have some questions posed before the seminar. Arriving at a seminar with understanding will allow you the confidence to question and analyse the topic, resulting in new and innovative ideas - which is what university study is all about!