

# **Essential Academic Skills**

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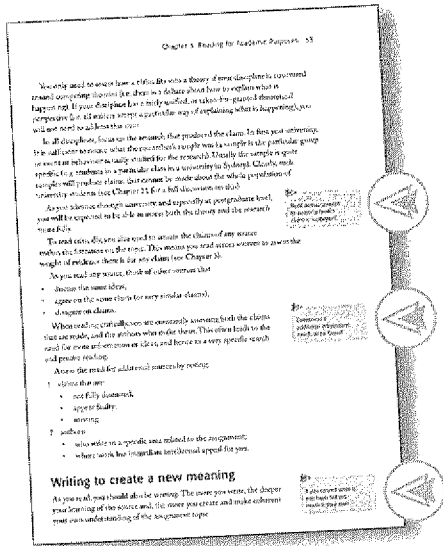
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# Guided Tour

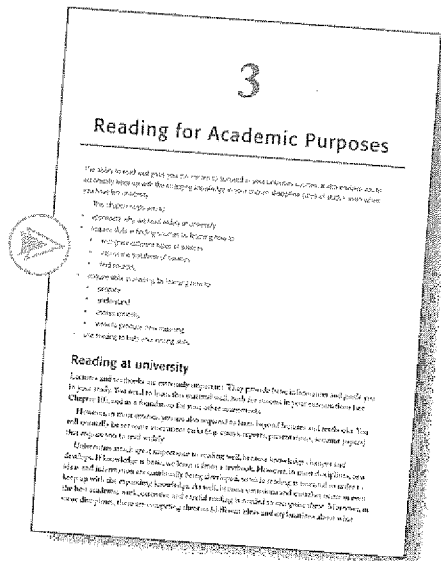
## Chapter objectives

Each chapter begins with a short overview of the chapter to aid understanding and navigation.



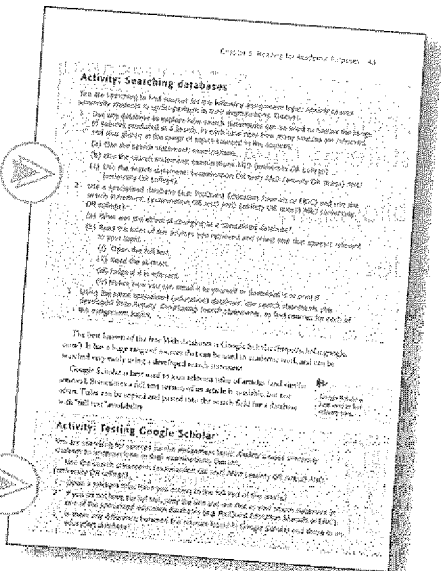
## Activities

The activities help readers to understand the ideas covered in each chapter.



## Margin notes

Notes in the margins highlight key points throughout each chapter.



6.2. **Counterproductive Effects**

- **Counterproductive effects:** a wider range of effects on students' motivation and learning, with slight adjustments with respect to content.
- **Disabling Writings:** as noted in Deppa (2005, p. 12) regarding classroom-level differences:
  - Disabling writing about the writing process.
  - Being and being written by another person.
  - Being, work produced by another person.
  - Learning more about the writing process by reading than by writing about the writing process.

It is essential to the success of a writing process intervention. A student would require a solid understanding of the writing process to be able to write about the writing process. It is essential to the success of a writing process intervention. A student would require a solid understanding of the writing process to be able to write about the writing process.

**Writing formally**

Most formal writing assignments follow a formal structure. As a result, students may find it difficult to write about the writing process. It is essential to the success of a writing process intervention. A student would require a solid understanding of the writing process to be able to write about the writing process.

**Thinking**

Most formal writing assignments follow a formal structure. As a result, students may find it difficult to write about the writing process. It is essential to the success of a writing process intervention. A student would require a solid understanding of the writing process to be able to write about the writing process.

## Thinking questions

These questions encourage students to think more deeply about the topics.

6.1. **Intentional Misreading**

You cannot put blame for your own progress in writing on the student and prevent the claim and prevent the claim.

Reading is a complex process. It is not simply a matter of decoding the words on the page. It is a process that involves a great deal of thinking and interpretation. It is a process that involves a great deal of thinking and interpretation.

**Example: Paraphrasing**

When you read a text, you are not simply taking in information. You are also interpreting it. You are also interpreting it. You are also interpreting it.

## Examples

The examples provide further explanation of the key ideas.

6.1. **Formal Academic Style**

Formal academic style is a style of writing that is used in academic contexts. It is a style of writing that is used in academic contexts. It is a style of writing that is used in academic contexts.

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## Summary

A concise summary at the end of each chapter helps students to identify the most important points covered in the chapter.

## Glossary

At the end of each chapter a short glossary defines the key terms and concepts.

# Contributors

**Kathy Turner** has a PhD from the University of Queensland. She has lectured at Griffith University in Industrial Relations and published in the areas of Industrial Relations and Labour Process Theory. She is presently working at the Queensland Institute of Business and Technology, where she has developed and teaches courses on academic skills to both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

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We are very grateful to all our students. Their eagerness to learn, bravery in asking questions, and determination to understand have forced us to consider what it is we do and how we do it. We have been led to explain the steps in what we have taken for granted. In the process, we have enriched our understanding of the essential skills required for learning at university. We hope our learning can feed back into the learning of new students, and make the task of adjusting to university life easier and more exciting.

Many of our colleagues have contributed to the book. We are grateful especially to Margaret Buckridge whose contribution to Chapter 1 was invaluable. The following have also contributed in a significant manner to the production of this book: Cameron Allen, Michael Browne, Tiiti Gill, William Lawrence, Leanne O'Neill, and Mary-Anne Smith. Thank you.

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# 1

## Thinking About Learning

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The purpose of this book is to help you become the best learner you can be. Everything we know about learning suggests that failure to learn well is overwhelmingly the result of going about learning in the wrong way. Your teachers will do their best to design classes that will help you to learn. But what *you* bring to this situation is also very important.

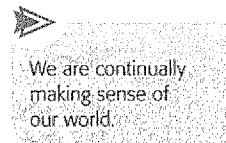
In this first chapter, we examine some of the things we know about learning that might help you to be aware of what you are doing, and to take control of it. We address:

- Ideas about the nature of learning;
- Learning approaches;
- Learning at university;
- The learning process.

### Ideas about the nature of learning

As we engage in any activity, we naturally form an idea about what we are doing. We continually fit new information and ideas into what we already know, thus creating meaning and understanding and the ability to act in new contexts. We also constantly test the value and usefulness of our

understandings through action in the world. In turn, we create new meaning from the processes and outcomes of these actions. Amazingly, all of this meaning making is mostly done without us having to think about what we are doing. It is as automatic as our ability to walk and adjust our balance and strength to meet different kinds of ground. However sometimes it is important to become conscious of this process.



### Thinking

Think of an activity that shows our ability both to make sense of the world, and to adjust to a new situation automatically. Think of some activity where we need to consciously consider how to approach a new task.



You have been involved in learning for a long time. As a natural result of this, you will have formed an idea of what learning is. Your **conception (idea) of learning** has been a useful one.

It has enabled you to graduate from high school or university and brought you to your present study program. In the following Activity, we are asking you to think about what your idea of learning is.

**Activity: Ideas about learning**

Complete the following statement to show what learning means to you.  
When I say that I have learned something, I mean that I

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Which statement below is *nearest* to your idea of learning?

- a Learning is when I add to my knowledge.
- b Learning is when I have successfully memorised something.
- c Learning is when I know something and can use that knowledge in a new context.
- d Learning is when I have understood something (it makes sense to me).
- e Learning is when I understand things differently.
- f Learning is when I am changed as a person because of what I have learned.

Note: Adapted from an activity designed by M. Buckridge, personal communication, January, 2006.

All of the statements above are typical understandings of learning. They have been listed as the six conceptions of learning by Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty (1993).

Marton, Dall’Alba and Beaty’s (1993) conceptions of learning are:

- A Increasing one’s knowledge,
- B Memorising and reproducing,
- C Applying,
- D Understanding,
- E Seeing something in a different way,
- F Changing as a person (pp. 283–4).

There are two good reasons for becoming aware of what we think learning is about:

- 1 What we think learning is is closely linked to the strategies and approaches we use to learn;
- 2 By becoming aware of what we think, we can change our approaches if new tasks require a new kind of learning.

As you can see from Table 1.1, quite different learning strategies are usually associated with different ideas about learning.

Students with different conceptions of learning tend to use different strategies to learn

**Table 1.1** Different learning strategies associated with different conceptions of learning

Conception	Learning strategies
<i>Learning means:</i>	<i>If you thought about learning this way, then these are things you would most probably do in order to learn:</i>
A. Increasing one's knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make a note of something;</li> <li>• highlight it in a text book;</li> <li>• listen to something, or read it, without taking further action.</li> </ul>
B. Memorising and reproducing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a mnemonic (a rhyme, an association);</li> <li>• make a list of similar things;</li> <li>• say it or write it over and over;</li> <li>• test yourself or get others to test you.</li> </ul>
C. Applying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practise applying it, initially in simple ways;</li> <li>• look for examples;</li> <li>• work on projects that require this new knowledge;</li> <li>• use formulae to solve problems or do calculations;</li> <li>• practise using the knowledge in short answers or essays.</li> </ul>
D. Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think about the new knowledge actively in relation to what you already know;</li> <li>• consider how the new knowledge relates to what you know (is it similar or different?);</li> <li>• write about it in your own words to clarify it for yourself;</li> <li>• break it into parts and work out how the parts connect with each other;</li> <li>• talk about it;</li> <li>• find additional information about it;</li> <li>• draw a concept map or mind map or other diagram connecting it with other related knowledge;</li> <li>• engage in debates;</li> <li>• look for ideas and information that might show it is wrong or inadequate.</li> </ul>
E. Seeing something in a different way	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think actively about the implications in relation to your own experience;</li> <li>• find out about what this means for others;</li> <li>• consider whether this makes a difference to everyday taken-for-granted ways of thinking;</li> <li>• look for how this changes other things you know.</li> </ul>
F. Changing as a person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• change your ways of behaving and/or understanding because of what you now know;</li> <li>• see yourself and your relationship to others differently.</li> </ul>

*Note:* Adapted from a table developed by M. Buckridge, personal communication, January, 2006.

### Activity: Strategies involved in learning

1. Examine Table 1.1 and tick all the strategies you have ever used for learning (if you don't understand what is meant by a particular activity, do not tick it as it means you have not done it).
2. Go back to your initial conception of learning. Match it up with the main strategies associated with it.
  - a. Have you ticked all these strategies?
  - b. Have you ticked other strategies not included in your conception of learning?
  - c. Consider all the strategies you have ticked; which ones do you find *most useful* for learning? Underline these.
  - d. Are the underlined strategies associated with your conception of learning?
  - e. Are there any strategies you have *never* used?
3. Discuss the following questions with the student sitting next to you:
  - a. Why might there be a difference between one person's learning conception and the strategies he/she has engaged in while learning?
  - b. Why might there be a difference in learning conception between people?
4. Tell the tutorial the main ideas you discovered about learning conceptions and learning strategies.

Intention shapes  
how we learn.



You have probably noticed that there is some relationship between learning conception and the strategies employed in order to learn. One reason for the close association is probably that both are linked to the motivation or intention a student has in learning.

Students whose main intention is to just pass a course tend to employ strategies that (in their own estimation) allow them to accumulate as much information as possible in the shortest time. They use the strategies associated with learning conceptions A and B, and perhaps also C. Their general aim is to reproduce the content in the course.

On the other hand, students whose intention to learn is based on their own interest in the content of a course favour those strategies that enhance understanding. They are likely to use strategies associated with the learning conceptions D, E and F. Their overall aim is to find meaning.

### Thinking

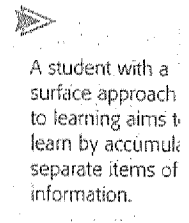
Are your learning strategies linked to your aim in studying? Think of particular courses.



## Approaches to learning

Two broad approaches to learning have been described. Marton and Saljo (1984) named these: surface and deep. The approaches indicate both the intention the student has in learning and the strategies employed as a means of fulfilling the intention.

Students with a **surface approach to learning** are not interested in the content, but in some extrinsic (outside of the task) factor. They may, for example, be aiming to just pass in order to obtain employment or they may be studying because their parents expect it. As a result of a lack of interest and motivation, these students do not aim to understand the content, but to reproduce it. They learn as if they were filing information in a computer. Each new file is given a name and a place. However, the files are not linked. Such students also have a poor search function. While they can easily retrieve a particular file, they find it difficult or impossible to think about ideas that occur in different files.



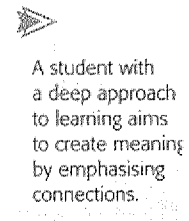
Some students consistently employ a surface approach in their learning. However, most students act in a much more strategic manner, using it only occasionally (e.g. when they are not interested in a particular activity or when the task demands it).

### Activity: Thinking about a surface approach to learning

- 1 What happens when you ask a person who has a surface approach to learning *why* something occurs? Why do you get this response?
- 2 Can you think of anything you have learned with a surface approach? How did you learn it?
- 3 How long do you find you can retain (keep) information you have learned with a surface approach?

Students who have a **deep approach to learning** are quite the opposite. Such students have an intrinsic (linked to the task itself) motivation or intention. They want to find meaning in the content by:

- looking for connections between ideas;
- looking at the way ideas and information are organised;
- examining how their new knowledge fits in with what they already know;
- critically assessing ideas and information.




The term 'deep approach' is usually reserved for speaking about students' intentions and strategies within an educational context. However, to reveal the importance of the deep approach in creating meaning, understanding and enjoyment, it is useful to think of it in terms of learning outside of an educational setting.

A student with a deep approach is like a well informed observer of a sporting event. Such an observer not only recognises each player, but also notices how he/she adds to or detracts from the game as a whole. Moreover, what is happening in the game is connected to what has occurred in other games. The observer can thus assess what is so exciting, interesting, or poor about the particular event being watched.

### Activity: Recognising when we have a deep approach to knowledge

- 1 Find someone else in the tutorial who shares a similar interest to you (e.g. football, cricket, soccer, table tennis, gymnastics, heavy metal music, travel, surfing etc).
- 2 Take one particular instance (e.g. a particular player, band, beach etc). Describe what makes it memorable (or important).
- 3 Review with your partner how you described the instance:
  - a Did you describe the instance by making *connections* to what happened at the game or event or place?
  - b Did you describe the instance by making *connections* to other games, players, events, places etc?
  - c Did you make some judgement by *comparing* players, games, events, places etc?
- 4 Do you consider you have a deep approach to learning about the topic you have discussed?

Whether a student has the desire or intention to learn in a surface or deep manner depends upon both the student and his/her educational environment. Clearly students have certain preferences for how they learn. The educational setting also encourages students to take a particular approach to knowledge. If a course is structured to provide a vast quantity of information, and if the assessment of the course is aimed at testing recall (memory) of specific items of information, then students are led into taking a surface approach to their learning. On the other hand, if a course aims to show how ideas and information are connected, and if the assessment tests and encourages students to show how ideas are linked, then students are encouraged to approach learning in a deep manner.

 All university courses require a deep approach to learning.

Every university course aims, to some extent, to encourage deep learning. While many courses require some memorising, this is always expected to be carried out within the context of a general understanding of the content.

Although there is much variation in how particular courses are presented, the underlying aim is to encourage deep learning by:

- leading students to see how ideas and information are linked;
- encouraging students to become curious and interested in the content;
- enabling students to participate in discussion on course topics;
- developing student ability to display their knowledge of the course through assessment that tests not just knowledge of information and ideas, but also how a student has thought about and integrated (put together) these.

### Activity: Thinking about prior (past) experience

Find someone who has come from the same country or the same kind of schooling as yourself.

- 1 Together, examine the bullet-point list of ways that a university uses to encourage deep learning.
- 2 Think of how you learned previously (e.g. in high school, or in your university in your home country). Is it the same or different from the bullet-point list? Be specific.

It is important to reassess our conception of learning as we enter new contexts. In particular, it is necessary to give thoughtful consideration to what kind of learning is expected at university. University education places greater demands on all students as it, quite rightly, challenges students to do more than they had previously. Domestic students and overseas students who have succeeded at school by focusing on memorising discrete (separate) pieces of information, especially, will find they have to transform how they learn in order to be successful at university. Moreover, all students, no matter what their preference is for an approach to learning, need to upgrade their learning skills to cope with the more demanding context at university.

### The learning process

Not surprisingly, there are number of **theories** (developed ideas) of what is significant in learning. One theory, *constructivism*, places the idea that “it is the learner who constructs knowledge” (Biggs, 1991, p. 2) at the centre of its explanation of learning.

The learner is at the centre of the two processes involved in understanding: taking in new information and ideas, and trying them out in “the world”. This can be seen by examining the five stages in learning at university:

Encounter or be introduced to the idea, ... or skill.

Get to know more about it.

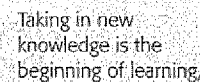
Try it out for oneself.

Get feedback (response).

Reflect (think), adjust, try again (Toohey, 1999, p. 153).

Active engagement is required at each stage of learning. A student begins by taking in some new idea or information. At this stage the student can actively learn by employing strategies appropriate for understanding. It will probably lead automatically to the need for further information, either because some ideas need to be clarified, or out of an interest in pursuing the topic in greater depth.

However, learning is not complete until it is checked for compatibility with what others understand. Our knowledge is communal, that is, it depends on our agreement as



Taking in new knowledge is the beginning of learning.



a community on what counts as knowledge. Thus, once we have assimilated the new idea or information, we need to try it out “in the world”. We do this most typically by speaking or writing about it (we can also make it into music, or dance, or paint it etc).

Learning is enhanced and developed by feedback from the relevant community of learners.

The **feedback** (response) we receive from either ourselves or others is a significant part of learning. If the feedback confirms our way of understanding, then our new knowledge becomes more thoroughly “ours”. If others are puzzled or unsure, we need to continue learning.

Reflection deepens learning. It involves a conscious consideration of both our own and other’s feedback. We can decide if we need to adjust our understanding, alter how we present it, or how we apply it. Having incorporated the feedback we can then try out our understanding in another context.

### Activity: Feedback

Discuss the following questions with the person sitting next to you.

- 1 Have you ever said something and the person you spoke to did not understand it?
  - a How did you know they had not understood?
  - b What did you do once you received their response?
- 2 Have you ever said something that you felt was exciting and new and the person you spoke to was excited by what you said?
  - a How did they show they appreciated what you said?
  - b What did you do when you heard their feedback?

With awareness of how you learn you can act to become the best learner possible:

- Maintain interest and curiosity about the content you are learning.
- Actively look for existing knowledge to help learn new ideas and information.
- Actively seek to link new knowledge to what you already know.
- Actively seek learning strategies to enhance understanding.
- Try out new knowledge by speaking or writing about it (or by other suitable means).
- Listen to feedback.
- Reflect on the feedback to find ways to adjust understanding or action.
- Reach a point where you realise that you have made the knowledge “your own”, and that you can use it in new contexts.

By being at the centre of knowledge creation, the learner has both power and responsibility.

As you have control over your own knowledge creation it is your responsibility to become aware of how you learn and so enhance your learning. Of course, you will meet obstacles. Sometimes courses are not designed well, and lecturers and tutors are not as helpful as you need them to be. However, you can always do the best you can, even in difficult contexts, by becoming aware of what learning is expected; and how you learn best.

### Activity: Thinking about your conception of learning

Go back to your original conception of learning.

1. Do you think it adequately describes how you learn?
2. If it does not adequately describe your learning, write another description of your concept of what learning is. Don't just copy from the book. Create your own description, being as clear and detailed as possible.

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3. Remember to return to this description of your conception of learning after you have completed your first semester. Consider if your conception of learning has changed, or if what you have is helping you to learn in the best possible way.

### Activity

Go to our web site [www.oup.com.au/orc/turner](http://www.oup.com.au/orc/turner) for more activities on the skills covered in this chapter.

### Summary

In this chapter we have explored how learning is a creative act of knowledge acquisition (gaining). We all have some control over both what, and how, we learn. Thus, we can enhance our capabilities, and so increase our chance of success at university, or indeed in any endeavour. By becoming more aware of what we think learning is, of what kind of learning is required, and how learning occurs, we have the power to alter and develop how we learn.

This book has been written to help you learn at university. It provides you with the essential skills in listening, reading, writing, speaking, and researching that are required in undertaking most university courses. In each chapter we show you, in a step by step manner, the basic skills needed to complete each learning task. More importantly, we consistently encourage and support you to stretch your skills in learning. Our aim is to help you become the best learner that you can be, for success both at university and in life.

## Glossary

**conception of learning** an idea of what we mean by learning.

**constructivism** is a theory that sees learning as occurring only when a person actively constructs his or her own understanding of that which they are learning.

**deep approach to learning** an approach in which the learner seeks meaning by looking for connections and structures.

**feedback** a response made to someone who has produced a statement (in any form) of an idea, or information, or feeling. It can indicate level of understanding or of agreement or disagreement.

**theory** a description and/or explanation of what occurs, which is supported by evidence and that is usually produced through a careful process of research (investigation).

**surface approach to learning** an approach in which the learner seeks to remember information as a series of discrete or isolated facts.