

Banbridge High School Guide to Independent Study & Learning

What is Independent Learning?

Post 16 study requires students to work much more independently. Once you start in September, teachers will suggest ways in which you can support your own learning in their subject - additional reading, ways in which you can practice key skills, programmes that you can watch on TV or online resources.

All students must be prepared to spend a much more significant amount of time studying at home and at weekends, some of which will be directed, i.e. homework or coursework, and some will need to self directed, i.e. reading beyond set texts, continual revision of key ideas and terms. Most importantly, this should be done from the very beginning of your course and in every subject. There will be some subjects which require you to complete short tasks more regularly, whilst others will set you a deadline for an extended piece of coursework or research.

Time-management and good planning are essential to success in your studies, and you should give serious consideration to the commitment needed for you to reach your potential. Part-time work is important for gaining life-skills and experience, however it should not interfere with your ability to reach your academic potential or qualifications needed to progress along your career path. You must therefore consider this carefully, and make your own decision, but bear in mind that only committed and hardworking students will achieve success at Post 16 qualifications.

Understanding - this is your aim!

The only way to get good grades at Post 16 level is to understand your work!

When taking notes do not just try to write down all that the teacher says, you need to add your own comments to help you understand. If you have not understood a concept, ask your teacher to explain again, either straight away or at the end of the lesson. It is also a great idea to go over your notes as soon as possible to underline/highlight/add additional key points, ensuring that you will make sense of them when you come back to them.

Time Management & Organisation

All students are provided with a Student Planner, which will be regularly checked by your Form Teacher/Head of Year. This book is an essential tool for your studies and in helping you in managing your time effectively and meeting deadlines.

Suggestions to Improve/Help with Time Management and Organisation:

- Record all homework and deadlines clearly in your planner - no exceptions. This is especially important at very busy times of the year when you may find you have more work to complete than at others.
- Always be aware of the level you are working at, and think about what you need to do to move to the next level. This can be through results from class tests or teacher feedback.
- Have an everyday folder to bring to school; this will have sections for each of your subjects. You can then transfer the notes to your subject folders when you get home. NOTE: Always ensure that you have the notes required for each class - excuses will not be accepted if you have wrong folder!
- Use dividers to sub-divide your subject folders. Colour coordinate your subjects to help you visually manage your information.
- Make sure you put the date and heading on each and every page of your notes and handouts. Should your notes get into a muddle you will be able to easily sort them.
- Find out your exam board ASAP for each subject and download a copy of the specification/syllabus so that you can see the topics you will be covering and what the exact assessment objectives are.
- Create a weekly study plan, carefully consider your workload and commitments and organise your time to ensure you keep on top of your work.
- Make sure you have all of the equipment needed for all of your subjects. Look after them!
- Prioritise the work which needs to be completed; DO NOT PUT OFF HARDER TASKS.

Planning Ahead

Most people would agree that the most difficult aspect of effective study is the development of good time-management skills. This problem can be tackled under three headings:

- Yearly planning
- Weekly planning
- Daily planning

Yearly Planning journals can be used at the beginning of the year and pinned to your wall to act as a framework for your studies. The planner will give you an overview and help you work towards long-term deadlines, such as exam dates and coursework deadlines set by examination boards; you can also add details of field trips, holidays, careers conventions and other events which can disrupt your study plan. Year planners are available from office supply retailers.

A Place to Work

Psychologically it is helpful to have a regular study space, which you associate with working. This may be your desk, an area of the study room or a quiet room at the public library. If you have your own work area at home keep everything arranged at hand.

It is usual to assume that students like to work at a desk, although some students do manage to do so sitting on their bed or the floor. The most important things to consider are whether:

- you are working to maximum efficiency
- your handwriting is suffering because you are not working on a hard surface
- your back is aching because your chair is the wrong height for your desk
- you are too hot/cold
- light is inadequate

Consider all of these to make sure you are working to your maximum on all occasions and in a manner suitable to the task you are completing.

Keeping Notes Organised

1. **Files** - Ensure, from the very beginning of your courses, that you have a file for each subject and that they are labelled as each new topic is introduced. This may seem obvious, but it is an easy task to put off only to find that a few weeks down the line your notes are in a mess and you cannot find something important. To avoid losing sheets of paper, have some extra poly pockets or reinforcers to fix ripped paper holes in margins.
2. **Handouts** - if your are given notes which have not been punched, you need to get a hole punch for home or some poly pockets to put them into until they are punched and filed.
3. **Post It Notes** - these can be used to highlight important sections of your texts, notes and can help you to colour coordinate your learning for class tests. They can also serve as reminder notes to bring in a particular piece of work or equipment.
4. **Magazine Holders** - A number of subjects, especially Geography, Business Studies ICT, Art, have supporting reading materials in magazine form. These can be keep in a reinforced cardboard holder on a shelf near your work area. If you use Post-It notes to mark useful articles in these, much time can be saved when researching your topic.

Learning Styles - How do people learn best?

There are three different learning styles:

Auditory - you learn by listening

Visual - you learn by looking/watching/visualising

Kinaesthetic - you learn by doing

To become a truly independent learner you must identify your **PREFERRED** learning style, and be prepared to try different approaches to be come an effective learner.

To find out about your preferred learning styles complete this web based tool:

<http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire>

Reading & Understanding

For many Post 16 students one of the most daunting tasks is the amount of reading required. To succeed it is not only necessary to read set texts but to read around it too. Teachers will stress the need for reading to extend your background knowledge of their subject. It can be difficult to find time to do this, especially with other study and responsibilities.

Reading is however, a two way process whereby our minds interact with the text and we draw on knowledge already gained to process the information - this is why reading around a subject is very important. Watching TV news and documentaries and reading a quality newspaper are also ways of extending your knowledge base.

Reading for different purposes

When you are reading for pleasure you adapt your technique according to your material, e.g. you do not read every word of a magazine from cover to cover. Instead you flick through the pages to find an article which interests you or you read an article with a catchy caption and you turn straight to that page. If you were to read a novel in the same way, you would completely miss the plot! To read a novel correctly, you need to read it closely from beginning to end, and even then you will miss words. To study a novel or a written piece, you must read it carefully and take notes as you do so.

Reading Techniques:

- **Recreational Reading** - light reading which does not require you to recall later what you have read, although you may choose to do so.
- **Skimming** - This involves looking quickly at a page or chapter or a whole book to get an idea of what it contains. To do this you would make use of the titles, subheadings, diagrams, illustrations, etc..
- **Scanning** - looking at particular information. You need to move your eyes quickly across the text until you find what you are looking for; you then read that section carefully.
- **Detailed Reading** - This involves careful word-by-word reading at a normal speed. This type of reading is needed to understand complex and detailed information once you have located it by scanning or skimming.
- **Reading for Study** - This type of reading will involve the use of skimming and scanning in order to locate specific information. You will then read closely with attention to details, making notes in order to facilitate recall of information at a later stage.

Taking & Making Notes

What is the purpose of taking notes?

By taking notes of topics you are able to engage with the the text or lesson by formulating your ideas and recording your thoughts. Note-making enables you to review your work and learning , helping you to revise for exams. Unless you have exceptional recall you will forget the content of your lessons, and it is your notes which will enable you to access this information at a later stage.

There are two processes involved:

Taking notes - you will need to able to take notes from speech in the form of:

- a lesson
- a lecture
- a film or DVD
- radio/audio programme
- dictation - where a teacher reads out information for you.

Making notes - you will need make notes either before a lesson as preparation or after a lesson as a follow-up. You will be expected to make notes from:

- a handout
- a textbook
- a library book
- research or source material
- your own lesson notes
- an experiment or investigation
- a visit or field trip

Making notes in your own time for study

1. **Handouts** - read through the text and highlight the key words, phrases and ideas. Then without looking back at the original text, write a summary in your own words, adding your own comments.
2. **Textbooks** - If you own a textbook (i.e. you have bought it!) you can underline or highlight freely. You can add a few comments in the margin, but be careful not to add too much as it can be distracting. If you do not own the book, you can highlight text and key words using a clear overlay and a water-soluble projector pen. Use these highlighted words/phrases to get a framework for your notes.

3. **Library Books** - Ask if you can photocopy the relevant pages in order to highlight or underline the relevant pages. You must NEVER write on library books, and must adhere to copyright laws. The Resource Room Technician will keep you right on this. There is a small charge for photocopying notes.
4. **Your own lesson notes** - to use these effectively, it is best to return to your notes regularly and on the day they were taken. Research has shown that after ten minutes your ability to recall knowledge begins to decline steeply, and by the end of twenty four hours you will have retained only 20% of the information unless you reviewed it.

It is very important to get into the habit of writing notes on a daily basis so that you can review/revise later. Exams may be a long way away, but your time will pass quickly and you may not have the time to make notes at a later stage.

Writing up notes - suggestions

Much like your learning style, making notes must take into account your personal needs and the format which meets these needs best. Notes taken in preparation for the next lesson need less time and attention to detail than those needed to aid revision for example. It is therefore worth taking time to make thorough revision notes to avoid panic at a later more critical stage.

- **Write legibly** - If you have difficulty revising from your own handwriting, type your notes! This has the advantage of allowing you to add more information and use the spellcheck facility.
- **Make your notes visually appealing** - Leave plenty of spaces and use colour where you can, e.g. quotes can be one colour and key words and definitions in another.
- **Use pictures, symbols and diagrams** to illustrate key ideas. This will make them seem more personal and will help your recall, as you will associate the picture with certain phrases.
- **Use headings, sub-headings and bullet points** - this makes it easier to locate information which has been listed logically and in a linear fashion.

Note Formats

The method and style of your notes will depend on the subject and your preferred learning style.

- **Visual, Left-brained learner** - prefers notes which are systematic and sequential. You prefer notes in a listed manner.
- **Visual, Right-brained learner** - patterned notes in a flow-chart. You will also find colour and drawing useful.
- **Auditory learner** - record ideas on a podcast or on a laptop.
- **Kinaesthetic learner** - you will probably learn best by writing out notes several times, using different formats.

Memory and Learning

Mnemonics

Mnemonics are useful when you have to remember a number of things and the order is important. To make a mnemonic you need to make a sentence where each word starts with the same letter as the thing you need to remember. A simple example is for the planets:

My **V**ery **E**ducated **M**other **J**ust **S**erved **U**s **N**ine **P**ickles.

Mercury; **V**enus; **E**arth; **M**ars; **J**upiter; **S**aturn; **U**ranus; **N**eptune; **P**luto
(even though Pluto is now not classified as a planet!)

Flow Charts

Flow charts are easy-to-understand diagrams showing how processes fit together. This could be a recipe, an experiment, a training session, or a computer program. Each step leads on to the next one, and you can show different outcomes depending on the choices made as you travel along a path of the flow-chart.

Mind Maps

Mindmaps have a general structure, which is basically a central picture/phrase/topic which is the focus. Around this then extend the blooms, which are the key points to remember about the focus. They reduce the amount of text by roughly 90%

Mindmaps use colour, development of structure and active learning to engage you in your learning. They also help you to visualise and remember the key points when asked to recall them for writing essays or completing examinations.



Learning will not happen if you are not interested in your work!

Before you start out on your studies, it is important to be realistic. It is likely that you will not enjoy every aspect of your course, so it is up to you to make these less interesting areas interesting!

Recalling Information

Your ability to recall information improves if you consider the following:

- **‘Firsts’ and ‘Lasts’** - these are the first and last things you do in a study session. Regular breaks will assist you in remembering these first and lasts.
- **‘Outstandings’** - things which are different, which stand out and may not seem to fit in with the rest of your information. Mnemonics work particularly well here.
- **‘Repetitions’** - We all know that the more often we repeat something the more likely it is to be remembered.
- **Interesting** - make things personally interesting to you by using pictures or plays on words.
- **Associations** - link ideas together, possibly with the use of a mind map.

The Power of Breaks & Brain Gym Exercises

As you are approaching a break, your mind becomes more attentive, and the break can in fact, refresh your mind. You will then restart your new session with heightened attentions, with a first, which you are more likely to remember.

Each study session should be ideally split into chunks of 20 - 30 minutes each (minimum) before a break is taken. The break itself should not be seen as an opportunity to watch TV or play the XBox - this will undo the good done in your study session. Consider relaxing or doing some ‘Brain Gym’ exercises!

- Right index finger on the nose, left hand through the ‘hole’ made by the right arm and touch the right ear.
- Rubbing the tummy with one hand and patting the head with the other; then swap and repeat.
- Two clenched fists, but one thumb facing skywards; then swap.
- Standing - left arm makes a chopping actions and the other a sawing action. Then swap.

Review Your Learning

Your ability to recall information will be improved if you give it ten minutes to sink in, but then go over it again. 80% will be forgotten unless you review your learning within 24 hours of learning it. Reviews should be completed weekly, monthly, and then six months later.

Facilities and Resources for Successful Independent Learning

Rooms to Study in:

- Private Study Room
- Subject Tutor Rooms -with their permission and only if supervised.
- Form Teacher Room - with their permission and only if supervised.

Staff available to help:

- Subject Teachers
- Form Teachers
- Mentors
- Head of Year 13 & 14
- School Counsellor
- DEL Careers Advisor

Resources:

- Course text books
- Library books
- Study guides
- Course specifications
- Exemplar material on exam board websites
- VLE
- Internet resources - carefully selected and checked

Independent Learner Check List

I can and do ...	Tick	I can and do ...	Tick
organise my work/notes/folders		have at least one folder for each subject	
plan my weeks ahead		spend at least 2 hours on self directed study per subject each week.	
create a clear timetable of when and where I am going to do my studying		complete set tasks without adult intervention for increasing periods of time	
ask for help when it is needed		present materials in a manner which supports a knowledgeable response	
use effective note taking to help recall of information		demonstrate good organisational skills to meet deadlines	
demonstrate persistence when a task is challenging		work in co-operation with peers to complete assignments	
organise, plan and redraft written work before submitting it		predict likely outcomes	
use a number of resources to locate information to complete tasks		see mistakes as part of the learning process	
set high goals		aim to achieve my goals through hard work	

Frequently Asked Questions

Is it all right to watch TV or music when you are working?

It is up to you! Many people feel they can work perfectly well with some background music on, but remember that television means that you have something else that will distract you because you have to watch it.

I work better under pressure and leave things to the last minute. If I still get them done what is wrong with that?

If you are under pressure you will make mistakes and forget things which are important. You also leave yourself no time to correct things or put them right. You might get things done but that does not mean that you do them as well if you planned your time and work schedule throughout the school year.

I do lots of things outside of school. How can I find time to do homework as well?

When you are busy, good time-management is vital. There is time for everything, but careful planning is important so you can do all that you want to do and to achieve all that you want to achieve. Usually the busiest people are the ones who get most done!

Why does my mind go blank in exams?

Worry is the most likely answer. This may be because you have not prepared as thoroughly as you could have done. If you have worked hard, and planned your learning and revision you have nothing to worry about and there should be no nasty surprises.

How can I remember important facts?

In the same way that you remember everything else - by going over it bit-by-bit as many times as you can. Put them on a bit of paper, Post-It notes or photocopy them and leave them around the house. You will be amazed what you can remember without even trying!

Independent Learning resources Links

Study Skills

www.palgrave.com/skills4study/index.asp

Write Better Essays

www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wdc/learning/essays/