

Case Study: Study Skills

Why should you need to study how to study? Isn't it a fairly straightforward activity? You read textbooks, or you listen to lectures, and then you do your assignments. What could be simpler than that?

But perhaps it isn't so simple . . .

Consider Michael & Sandy

Michael looked up again and saw it was now 7.20 p.m. — nearly an hour since he'd started and still he was on page two. Only another hour and he'd have to go and collect Fran from her class — and would he ever get started again after that?

'Early start tomorrow morning — can't afford to be too late tonight. And there's the spy thriller from 9 till 10 o'clock — only two more episodes to go — can't miss this one. I wonder what that East German agent was doing in Mexico? . . . No! I must get back to the sociology — or perhaps a cup of coffee would help the old concentration a bit — the last one didn't though — and that was only 30 minutes ago anyway.'

He looked at his note-pad. The title of the book and the chapter heading were neatly written across the top. The rest was blank. They said you should make notes as you read.— but notes of what?

Recognise anyone ???

No point copying out the book. "Sum up what you have read." How? . . . What is there to sum up? Is it totally obvious, or have I missed the point? . . . apart from those ridiculously long words, which don't make sense even when you read the definition in the dictionary. Why am I bored? I was expecting to be stimulated. The cover of the book looked quite attractive. Now I can't get through it. Every sentence has you switched off before you can find your way to the end of it. Is it just a joke? . . . A great big con? . . . Perhaps I should sort out my desk before going any further...'

The phone rang. It was Robbie . . .

He brought back another cup of coffee and sat down again.

'Only half an hour left now. Must concentrate. Let's go back to the top of page two — on second thoughts, I may as well go right back to the start and try to get some notes down, since I can't remember a word of it. . . . Good grief! It still seems like garbage. Oh forget it! . . . It's too late to get anywhere now. Let's slip down the old pub for a quick half before getting Fran. I can always give it another go later on, after the serial...'



... Come to me ...

Meanwhile, in another room a few streets away . . .

Sandy dropped another crumpled ball in the wastepaper-basket and stared blankly at the pad. What now? She had made half a dozen starts and hadn't once reached the middle of a page before rolling it up in disgust.



'How can I be stuck when I've hardly started? How long is this whole thing going to take? Will it ever be done? Not at this rate! . . . "It is the retailers rather than the manufacturers who shape society in the 1990s: discuss." How do you start on a subject like that? How am I supposed to know what shapes society? Even the textbook doesn't seem to be able to make up its mind. What shape is it anyway? What if I wrote, "Yes and no, depending on your point of view" . . . or perhaps I could just take a few sentences from here and there in the textbook and change the words round a bit—at least they couldn't say I'd got it wrong. But then the tutor said to write in your own words ...'

Plagiarism is the gravest sin!

As her mind slipped back to the classroom she winced. Why hadn't she kept quiet, as she'd meant to? She knew she didn't really understand what all those articulate types were spouting about — but the tutor seemed so keen for everyone to speak. When she'd finally wound herself up to say something it had been ages before there was a gap in the discussion — by then the subject had moved on. But the tutor had looked straight at her, so she'd blurted her point out — so fast that no one knew what she was talking about. They had pretended to 'use' what she'd said as they carried on the discussion, but she knew she'd made a right idiot of herself. How could she face going back again?

'Anyway — I didn't come away with that much — no notes. In fact I can scarcely remember a thing that was said. Why not give it a miss this week? Or would the tutor be offended? . . . Oh well — think about it later. Must get back to this miserable essay. I could try unrolling some of those balls and see what I wrote. No, I couldn't bear to read a single word. How about looking up "society" in the dictionary and starting from there? . . . Why am I doing this to myself? ...'

"You do it to yourself-you do.
It's you and no one else.
You do it to yourself-you do."
Radiohead.

Is it really as bad as that? Surely not; at least not all the time. On the other hand there are occasions when things do look pretty bleak. Although Michael and Sandy are fictitious, their problems are real enough — and they are not ones faced only by new students, or 'weak' students. They are general problems which we all face when we study — problems of struggling to understand, of managing time, of completing a task, and of keeping up one's morale.

One of Michael's problems is finding enough time for study between his social commitments, his work commitments, and his leisure interests. And both of them have problems using what time they have effectively. Both are concerned about what they should be doing and how long it should be taking them. Both are stuck and cannot see a way forward. Michael is repeatedly distracted — by a phone call, by his own thoughts, by making coffee, by tidying his desk, and most of all by the 'boredom' he experiences when he reads the text.

Sandy is distracted by her revulsion when she reads her own words and by her general feelings of inadequacy as a student. She sees herself as a very weak student and feels overawed by the tutor and the other students. Because of this she is approaching the essay in a very tentative way, which makes it difficult for her to get a good grip on the subject and 'express' her ideas. Instead, she is sitting almost hypnotized by the essay title, casting around in desperation for almost any way of getting shot of the essay.

Both are feeling fed up and have lost the enthusiasm they had when they started their studies. They are in danger of giving up and wasting all those good intentions. They need some help!

Exercise

Have you been in a similar situation?

- a) Identify two subjects you have studied in the past (one which you found easy and one which you found difficult). For each one briefly describe how you coped with assignments, essays and revision.

- b) Could you offer Michael and Sandy any advice