Studying independently

Tips to help you prepare for higher education study

One word you will hear a lot is ‘independent’. You will be expected to become an ‘independent learner’ and undertake ‘independent study’. But what does it mean?

What it doesn’t mean is that you always have to work alone (having a friend to bounce ideas off is good), or that you can’t ask if you’re not sure about something and can’t find the answer (we want you to progress with your learning). A lot of this independence is about organising yourself and managing your studies: keeping track of your study materials and resources and what you need to do; working out how to fit all your academic commitments into the time you have available to do them.

However, being an independent learner also means:

- Planning your own research and understanding how to limit its scope
- Finding, selecting and evaluating resources
- Knowing how to get the most out of your reading
- Thinking critically about what you learn, from your tutors and from your own reading and research

Planning your own research

When you have an assignment to write or some primary research to do, you will usually be expected to work out how to do this for yourself. You may have a suggested reading list, or some guidance on research, but essentially you will need to take decisions about the best way to conduct your research in order to answer the brief you have been given, and be prepared to justify them.

Reading the brief… be sure about what the assignment question or brief is asking you to do - the number one complaint from markers is that the student didn’t answer the question. Identify three things: what is the overall topic; what is the particular area you are being asked to discuss; how are you being asked to discuss it.

Deciding on a research strategy… You may already have a basic understanding of your research subject, in which case you can decide on the key areas to discuss and write yourself some questions for each to help guide your reading or data collection. If you're not so familiar with the topic, read something to give you a good basic understanding first - an introductory chapter in a textbook, or brief encyclopaedia article, for instance.

Limiting the scope… One of the important things you will learn in higher education study is how much information there is on any subject - and how little of that you will able to read! It’s easy to think that you might miss something if you don’t read ‘one more text’, but how do you know when to stop? A good strategy is to start by reading three texts that give you some different ideas to compare. Use these ideas to make a structure for your discussion, write some draft sections then do any more reading that is necessary to fill in gaps and reinforce your evidence.

Choosing research methods… If you have to do primary research, think carefully about the best way to do this. For instance, in the social sciences, many students go straight for the online questionnaire option, when it might be more appropriate to conduct focus groups or semi-structured interviews. You will need to justify your choice of methods when you write up your findings, so make sure there is a good reason!
Finding, selecting and evaluating sources

You will probably have a suggested reading list to start you off, but you will mostly be expected to find and select resources yourself. Using your institution’s library and a variety of online tools, you will find a range of materials on your topic. It’s important to consider whether the materials you find are appropriate for the task: are they academically authoritative, for instance, or up-to-date?

How to use your reading list… Unless you are told that a particular text is essential reading, the reading list is not compulsory. It is there for you to select texts from and as a guide to give you an idea of where to start. In fact, the books on your reading list may be in great demand. If everything on your reading list is out on loan, you will be expected to find additional appropriate reading for yourself.

Bibliographies and databases… These can be a good way to find more reading. If you already have one text on the topic, look at the bibliography to find more texts that might be useful. Your library will also provide access to paper indexes and online catalogues and databases that you can search to find more materials.

E-resources… Many books and most journal articles are now available online. You usually get access to these through your library, perhaps directly from their catalogue, or by using a password on an external website. You may also find some websites useful, especially if you are looking for official statistics or research reports.

Evaluating websites… Websites can be inappropriate as sources for academic work. Always check who has responsibility for the website: if it is a university, or government, or a respected organisation, for instance, it is appropriate. Anyone can set up a website and start publishing information without there being any checks as to whether it is true, so be very cautious. And be wary of Wikipedia! The page you’re reading could have been written by an expert, or by the student in the room next to you - you’ll never know!

Super-size your reading!

It’s not called ‘reading for a degree’ for nothing! You will almost certainly be doing a lot of reading in your time in higher education, so knowing how to get the most from it is a key practice to develop.

Reading actively… You are more likely to be able to concentrate, and to get something useful out of what you read if you think about your goals before you start. What are you hoping to find out from your reading? What questions do you need answers to? What are you comparing this to? (Another text? Something your tutor has said? Your own ideas?)

Being selective… Unless you are studying a particular text in detail, you will probably not be expected to read a whole book. If you have thought about your reading goals, you can use tools like the contents page and index to find which parts of the text are interesting to you. If you have no index or contents page, skim read until you find something, then read that closely.

How to read a report… If you are reading a scientific or technical report, remember that you are unlikely to need to read it all. Read the abstract first to get an overview; then the introduction and the discussion sections, and the conclusions if they are not in the abstract. Only read the methods and findings if you need to talk about them in detail.

Making notes… You may be used to writing notes in the margins of your texts, but this isn’t always the best way to do it in higher education; you will have a lot more texts to read and compare and it can be difficult to find what you’ve noted. Write notes on separate sheets, and by hand rather than on the computer if possible (lessens the chance of you accidentally cutting and pasting someone else's
words), but only pick up your pen when there is something worth noting. And ALWAYS note bibliographic details when you write your notes.

**Thinking critically**

Critical thinking is a phrase you will hear often in higher education study. It does not mean criticise as in ‘find all the bad things about something’. Rather it means that you should always question what you have learnt, test it to see if it is valid and consider how it can be used in a wider context to say something meaningful about your topic. That doesn’t just apply to what you have learnt from your own reading and research, but also from your tutors.

**Be sceptical!**... Get into the habit of not accepting information without considering why you are happy to accept it. That might be very quick, for instance, ‘because it comes from a source I am sure is authoritative and objective’. Or it might need more thought: ‘It’s not what I expected to find. But there is persuasive evidence, I’ve done some further reading and I haven’t found anything that contradicts it.’ Remember that whoever reads your work will be sceptical too - so make sure you have shown that your research is careful and rigorous by correct referencing or (for primary research) thorough justification of your choice of methodology.

**Evaluate and assess**... Remember that even scholarly work is not wholly objective. Scholars choose different theoretical frameworks to interpret and measure ideas. They may be writing to convey a particular message, or from a different cultural perspective. Or they may be using a sample that cannot be generalised from, or straightforwardly compared to the sample you are using. Don’t just think about what has been written - consider why, and how it works.

**Keep asking why**... Remember when you were five years old and the annoying kid in your class was giving your teacher a hard time by constantly asking “why?” You need to become that annoying kid now - every time you find yourself making an assumption, ask yourself ‘why?’ Then, when you have the answer, ask ‘why?’ to that as well. Every time you do this, you have to consider and justify your reasoning - that’s what critical thinking is about.