1 STARTING OUT

University study and you

They know enough who know how to learn.

HENRY BROOKS ADAMS, 1907

Deciding to begin on a course of university study is a big step. Like most people, you have probably found the process of enrolling and working out what is required of you more complicated than you expected. You might be wondering what other surprises are in store for you in your new enterprise. This book is designed to help you with communication and study skills that might be new to you and that will be important for all the subjects you are studying at university. You can read the book from front to back, look up particular topics as you need to, or use just one section you find useful. Each section is self-contained and deals with a different aspect of the communication skills necessary for successful university learning.

This first chapter offers advice on how to approach some of the new teaching and learning experiences you will encounter at university. It also deals with some of the skills you will need to get the most out of lectures, seminars, tutorials, and workshops.

An important part of communicating with other people is learning to make the most of the communications you receive. Most of the teaching we get at school concentrates on how we should send messages, and takes our ability to receive them for granted. For study and for work, however, we spend most of our time listening to, or reading messages from, other people, and our ability to learn depends to a great extent on our ability to understand and respond to the messages we receive.

WHAT IS UNIVERSITY LEARNING ALL ABOUT?

This might seem a silly question. Most of you have enrolled in university study to learn about history, psychology, geology, engineering, drama, and other subjects you are interested in or that you hope will help you find an interesting job. But as well as learning about the body of knowledge that makes up the core of these disciplines, what else do you need to know? What else are your lecturers and tutors trying to teach you by setting certain kinds of assignments and structuring your courses in particular ways?

Of course the specific answers to these questions will vary from person to person and course to course, but there are some general aspects of learning that government, academics, and employers agree are vital for all university students. It is not enough to know about the specific content of mathematics, English, or biology. You must know how the disciplines you study are connected and be able to do something interesting with the information you have learned.

Surveys of academics have shown that the most common objectives for university staff are: to teach students to **analyse** ideas or issues **critically**, to develop students' intellectual/thinking skills, and to teach students to comprehend principles or **generalisations**.

Different subject areas have their own specific objectives as well, but these general principles underlie all university learning. This kind of learning and the skills it develops never become outdated and can be applied to other aspects of your life outside university study. This kind of learning will help to develop your imagination, judgment, and problem-solving skills.

Academics also value communication skills very highly as an essential part of a university education, as do employees of university graduates. Surveys in Australia, Britain, and the USA show that employers of university graduates look for thinking and problem-solving skills in their employees and value good communication skills highly. They expect students at university to learn how to speak and write well in their chosen profession.

So, teaching at university aims to:

- provide you with a body of knowledge in your chosen field
- stimulate you to enquire, analyse, and make decisions
- encourage you to be flexible and creative
- develop your communication skills.

It is important to remember these aims when you are studying and completing the tasks set for your course. If a lecturer sets an **essay** topic, for example, he or she will

want more than a regurgitation of facts. In your essay, you should be trying to show not only that you know the facts but also that you can use them to develop a new idea or to see new connections between different ideas, that you can **explain** your ideas in a clear and interesting way, and that you can make some decisions about them on the basis of what you have learned.

LEARNING: HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

You cannot have learning administered to you like a dose of medicine or a massage. *Learning is something you do.* You must be active in your learning tasks to get the most out of them and to enjoy them. It helps if you are interested, not only in what you are studying, but also in the process of study itself. Think about the way you study and give yourself feedback on it. This will help to make you a more effective learner. In the same way that golfers work on their swing, bowlers in cricket work on their action, and tennis players work on their serve, students should work on their studying technique to improve it. Your study skills will not get better by themselves.

Researchers have identified a number of factors that improve the quality of student learning and a number of factors that reduce it. Some of the factors that improve learning are listed in the statements below. You will find learning more effective if the following statements apply to you:

TIP

Successful learning is active learning: process information; discuss ideas with others; set goals; experiment; reflect.

- You process information rather than store it; that is, you think about what information means and how you can apply it.
- You have a personal interest in the topic you are studying; it is much easier to remember something you are interested in.
- You have some personal goals in mind; you will work harder if you can see how your learning will help you to achieve some personal ambition.
- You can develop some of your own ideas; no one works well if they are just following orders.
- You can put something into practice; you need to see how it works.
- You use social processes; you **discuss** your work with others, either formally or informally.
- You can establish a positive relationship with one or more tutors; getting to know some of your teachers will help to give the subject you are studying a human face.
- You share in the responsibility for learning; you do not wait for that magic knowledge pill.
- You can work independently; you do not need someone to tell you what to do.
- You feel free to take risks; if you do not, your learning will be limited.
- You see learning as a process of change rather than an end product; you will never learn everything.
- You reflect on the way you are learning; you are aware of your own learning characteristics.

LEARNING IN LECTURES

Lectures live or online still provide the basis of university teaching, and you will find them very different from the kind of teaching you have been accustomed to at school or in the workplace. Few people consider lectures an ideal teaching method, but they are an efficient and cost-effective way of serving a variety of purposes for a large number of students.

For students learning online, lectures are usually provided as written text. Information about learning by reading is contained in Chapter 2. For students on campus, learning in lectures means learning to listen, often in difficult conditions.

The forms of lectures vary and some lecturers are more interesting than others, but there is no escaping the fact that lectures are essentially fifty-minute monologues to a large and silent audience. Not every lecture can be fascinating, and the crowding in many lecture theatres makes it hard to concentrate. This is true for lecturers as well as students. The larger the audience and the more crowded the lecture theatre becomes, the harder it is for the lecturer to maintain contact with individual members of the audience. This means that you have to work at getting the most out of lectures.

The following sections of this chapter look specifically at listening and note-taking in lectures and small groups, but below are a few practical introductory tips to help you get the most out of lectures.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF LECTURES

- Arrive early so you can get a good seat where you can see the lecturer, the overhead screen, and the blackboard or whiteboard. Some lecture theatres are very crowded at the beginning of the semester, so if you are late you might end up not getting a seat at all.
- Sit near the front of the lecture theatre. This will help you feel more involved in what is going on as well as making sure you can hear, see, and avoid distractions from people arriving late, leaving early, and so on.
- Make sure you know what the lecture is about before you come so that you do not spend the first ten minutes wondering what is going on.
- If there is a lecture handout, scan it quickly before the lecture starts so that you do not waste time writing down the information it contains.

The main purposes of lectures are to:

- provide a framework for your course by indicating the areas you should cover and the order in which you should study them
- supply, in summary, the essential knowledge in those areas and to **indicate** where you can find further information
- present a particular point of view, or a number of different points of view, on the major areas of concern to the course
- explain areas of difficulty or controversy
- allow an expert in your field to **outline** original ideas or research
- provide a practical guide on how to carry out a task or procedure.

It is important that you recognise the purposes of different lectures so that you can respond to them appropriately. In some, you might want to take detailed notes of what the lecturer is saying. In others, you might want to concentrate on listening or noting comments to **consider** later. The titles of the lectures should give you some clues to their purpose. If they do not, try to work out the purpose from the lecturer's introductory remarks and plan your noting strategy accordingly. Lectures are an important fact of university life. Do not expect them to be song and dance acts. Think about the purpose of each one and be active in getting the most out of them.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Reading and listening are the two language channels through which we receive information. Studies have shown that the average adult does about three times as much listening as reading and that we spend more than half our working day listening (Wolvin & Coakley 1996). In spite of this, we get very little instruction in listening. Perhaps this is because we tend to equate listening with hearing, and we assume that listening is an inherent ability rather than a skill that needs to be taught. Effective listening, however, requires concentrated effort. Many people are poor listeners, and for them the whole process of communication becomes very difficult.

One of the main difficulties with listening is that many people regard it as a passive process, whereas listening must be active if the listener is to get the most out of any oral communication. You need to be aware of possible problems in listening effectively, your own listening habits, and how you can improve them.

Barriers to effective listening

Many people have difficulty with listening, especially over an extended period of time: for example, in a lecture. If you are aware of the major barriers listed below you might be able to try some deliberate strategies to overcome them.

- *Thought speed*: this is a problem because the average talking speed is about 125 words a minute and intellectually you can process about 400 words a minute. This means that your thoughts can be very far ahead and far away from the speaker's words.
- *Failing to see listening as work*: listeners who do not understand that listening is an active process see any failure in their understanding as the fault of the speaker. Unless your purpose for listening is relaxation or entertainment, you must be active in assimilating the message the speaker is giving you.
- *Prejudice of various kinds*: your attitude to the speaker might colour your understanding of what is being said. If you like the person who is talking, for example, you might be prepared to accept whatever he or she says uncritically or to **interpret** it in a favourable light. If, on the other hand, you dislike something about the speaker, you might switch off completely or interpret the speaker's words in a negative way. This can have unfortunate effects on any learning situation.

TIP
Effective listening requires effort and practice.

- *Lack of interest*: it is easy to let your thoughts drift if you do not care about the speaker or what he or she is saying.
- *Distractions*: anything, from more important thoughts to noise outside the room, can be a problem if you let it.
- *Physical discomfort*: heat, cold, crowding, noise, light, and uncomfortable or unsuitable furniture can all cause difficulties in any listening situation.

Techniques for effective listening

Try using some of the techniques listed below to improve your listening skills.

- *Concentrate.* Use the time lapse between your thinking and the speaker's words to anticipate what the speaker will say next. Even if you are wrong, it will focus your attention on what is being said.
- *Analyse the message.* Look for deeper meanings, think about **evidence** for or against what is being said, and try to think of additional points or contrary ones.
- *Review.* Go over the main points the speaker has already covered, and **summarise** the information or **argument** so far.
- *Ask questions.* This is one of the most helpful ways of keeping your concentration, and it encourages the speaker. In a large lecture where you feel you cannot question the speaker, write down your questions to refer to later.
- *Be objective.* Do not make hasty judgments. Listen to what is being said before making decisions about it.
- *Find a motivation.* If you do not find a speaker intrinsically interesting, look for something you can use as a reason for concentrating. Ask yourself: 'What is this person saying that can be useful to me?' The answer might relate to your short- or long-term goals, or economic or emotional satisfaction. It does not matter what your motivation is, just as long as you are listening.
- *Stay physically alert.* If you are too relaxed physically, you will not be mentally active (and will in any case give a bad impression to the person speaking). You should be physically comfortable but not ready to doze. Sit upright, lean forward, and make an effort to respond to the speaker in an appropriate way, not as a favour to the speaker (although it is likely to produce a more interesting talk) but as a way of helping yourself.

Effective listening in lectures

Lectures present a particularly difficult listening situation: there is no personal contact between you and the lecturer; fifty minutes is a long time to maintain silent concentration; lecture theatres are often stuffy, noisy, and uncomfortable; and many lectures are not inherently entertaining. This means that you have to work at getting the most out of the lectures you attend. In addition to the techniques for listening in general, there are special techniques involved in listening effectively in lectures.

TIP

For effective listening in lectures: tune in; ask questions; review as soon as possible.

- *Tune in.* Prepare yourself for what is to be said. Good lecturers will help you in this step by telling you what they are going to talk about. Preview any material about the lecture so that you have some foundation on which to build the new information. You will then be more able to absorb the lecture content and to separate the information you need to note from background information to which you need only listen.
- *Ask questions.* The sort of questions you might ask are: 'What is the specific purpose of this information?', 'How does what is being said tie in with what I already know?', and 'What is the evidence for that particular statement?'
- *Review.* First, the review step involves going back, summarising (mentally or in writing) what has been said, comparing it with what you thought was going to be said, and evaluating the worth of what has been said. Ask yourself: 'What did I learn?' Good speakers and lecturers help in this respect by giving a summary. Second, review your notes after the lecture when you have had some time to reflect but before you have forgotten what the lecture was about.

TAKING GOOD NOTES IN LECTURES

Effective listening goes hand in hand with developing note-taking skills. Few people can listen to a fifty-minute lecture and remember all the salient points. To get the most from a lecture, you need to develop an efficient technique for taking notes. You cannot hope to take down everything that is said in lectures. In fact you should not try, as this will distract you from listening actively and decrease your chances of remembering and understanding.

How many notes should you take?

There is wide variation in the notes individuals feel they need to take in lectures. You have to work out for yourself how much you need. Strike a balance between mindlessly copying down every word you hear and taking down so little that you cannot work out what your notes mean. It is probably better to take more than you need until you are experienced enough to judge clearly. Try to vary your method of note-taking according to the purpose of the lecture.

TIP

To take good notes in lectures: be selective; consider your purpose; take down the main points; use consistent abbreviations; fill in details later.

- If the lecture deals with vital information that is not easily available elsewhere, you will need to take as full notes as possible.
- If the material in the lecture is available in textbooks you might find it more valuable to listen actively and only note the main points or parts of the topic that are difficult to understand.
- If the lecture is meant to provide background interest or context for something that is to come later, or that is dealt with elsewhere, you should listen as actively as you can to get the overall picture, and jot down only a few points as reminders.

- If the purpose of the lecture is to give a particular point of view on familiar or readily accessible material, you should be listening for, and noting, the lecturer's argument structure and points used as evidence without worrying about particular facts, figures, or dates, which you can look up later.

Hints for better note-taking in lectures

You should always identify your notes. Head the page with the subject, the title of the lecture, and the date. Number and date all the pages for each lecture. As the year progresses, you will collect pages and pages of notes, and having a quick way of identifying them will save time and endless searching.

Try to put the different sections of the lecture under **headings**, subheadings, letters or numbers. For example:

EXAMPLE OF HOW TO SET OUT LECTURE NOTES

Major heading:	HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
First major point:	Heredity vs Environment (a) heredity (b) environment (c) interactions of h and e
Second major point:	Continuity vs Discontinuity (a) continuity (b) discontinuity

Some lecturers will provide a structure like this for you on a computer projection or an overhead transparency. If they do, try to use the given structure for your own notes. Try to **distinguish** between the substance of the lecture material and illustrative examples. You could bracket examples, so that you can see the difference clearly. You should underline headings or important words or points. Use different types of underlining for different phrases. You can devise a note-taking script of your own. For example:

- You need not bother about taking down complete **sentences**. Key phrases are most important.
- Use as many abbreviations as you can and develop your own form of shorthand. For example, use **&** for and; **w** for with; **c** for about; → for led to, caused, or was followed by; and **C19** for nineteenth century.
- Insert abbreviations as the lecture progresses. In a statistics lecture the word 'probability' might occur a number of times. You might abbreviate it to **pro** or **pb** or even **p** if the meaning is quite clear.
- Most words are easily identified by using just the key letters (which must include the first and last letter). For example: **mst ppl hv lttl trbl rdg ths**.

Use ink or ballpoint, not pencil, for all your notes. Pencil is too difficult to read, especially after a lapse of time. Make sure that you have a wide margin, and write only on one side of the page. Use the opposite page for additions to your notes, amplifications, or summaries. If you miss a point there is no need to panic. Leave a space and ask a friend or the lecturer later.

Group your notes in titled folders so you can find them easily later.

Editing your notes

Remember, you want a set of notes to be a useful reference, so you should check to see that your notes are legible, clear, and complete. You will improve the effectiveness of your notes if you:

- read your notes over on the same day as you take them to make sure you will be able to understand them later on
- write in any words that you have abbreviated for the first time or that are hard to understand
- add any new words or phrases for greater clarity, or to fill in a detail or example
- tie several points together or change the order so as to better organise your notes
- underline or highlight some points emphasised by the lecturer
- consult some of the references mentioned in the lecture or your textbooks in order to develop some of the points in your notes further.

Sharing notes

Cooperating with others can make note-taking easier. You can **compare** notes with friends after a lecture to make sure that yours are accurate or to fill in gaps in your noting or understanding. Another way of making the task easier is to cooperate with someone else in the lecture. You can arrange with a friend to take notes for half the lecture each. In this way you can listen to half the lecture without writing anything down, and it will be easier to maintain concentration. Be careful, however. Not everyone is a good note-taker, and sometimes individuals hear completely different messages from the same lecture. Try this method once with a friend, and only persist if you find it useful. Sometimes the very fact that there is a difference between your perception and somebody else's can be illuminating.

Recording lectures

Most lecturers record their lectures and make them available through video streaming on the **web**, and by providing audio and/or video files of the lectures as downloads—that is, as podcasts. Listening to lectures in this way allows you to hear them without distractions, and at your own speed. If your lectures are not recorded, you can ask your lecturer if you can record them yourself. Many lecturers are happy to allow this. Remember that you will still have to make your own notes and make sure that you have understood the main points. Owning a recording does not, in itself, automatically transfer the lecture's contents into your brain.

Using lecture handouts

Remember that handouts and lecture notes provided on the web are usually only outlines or summaries. They are meant to supplement a lecture or make it easier to follow. Such supplements are helpful, but they are not intended to be substitutes for attending the lecture and taking your own notes. If you want to understand and remember what is in a lecture, you must listen to or read the whole text of the lecture and take your own notes.

LEARNING IN TUTORIALS, SEMINARS, AND WORKSHOPS

Tutorials and seminars, like lectures, might be new teaching and learning situations for you. Tutorial and seminar groups are small, interactive groups that meet regularly throughout the semester to complement the lectures. They are intended primarily for you to be able to express opinions, ask questions, and discuss course content with both your peers and your tutor. The size of each group depends on the number of students in the course as a whole, but is usually between ten and twenty-five students. In most courses the tutor who takes your group will also act as your main contact with the department that runs the course. Your tutor will try to get to know everyone in the group and will probably be responsible for marking your assignments.

What is the difference between a tutorial and a seminar?

In practice the distinction between tutorials and seminars is blurred, and people tend to use the terms interchangeably to mean any small, informal class in which discussion takes place between teacher and students. Sometimes, however, 'seminar' refers to a more formal group in which students or staff give talks on a chosen topic, whereas 'tutorial' implies an informal teaching session that complements a lecture and is led by a teacher.

Tutorial and seminar groups provide opportunities for:

- clarifying ideas covered in lectures
- exploring some aspects of lecture material in greater depth
- practising speaking and active listening skills
- debating ideas with others
- developing independent thinking skills
- getting to know a group of students in your course
- getting to know at least one member of staff who will also know you and give advice and help when you need them.

Getting the most out of tutorials and seminars

To get the most out of tutorials or seminars you must be able to join in the discussion. The responsibility for successful learning in a small group is shared between students and tutor. If you are poorly prepared or reluctant to speak the tutor might feel

obliged to fill the silence, and instead of a discussion you will have yet another lecture. The alternatives might be total silence or a dialogue between the tutor and perhaps one student. Always try to have a question to ask or an idea to offer in a small group. Your tutor will be grateful for any contribution, and you will feel a greater involvement with what is happening.

TIP

Attend classes regularly; prepare thoroughly; ask questions; volunteer your own ideas; encourage others to speak; listen carefully to all contributions.

For a successful tutorial or seminar you need to:

- attend regularly so that you get to know people quickly and learn to work with others
- prepare by doing the appropriate reading or any other work set
- check through the relevant lecture notes for any difficulties or suggestions you would like to raise
- ask questions; if there is something you don't understand, there are probably others who don't understand either
- ask for examples or evidence to explain difficult or controversial ideas
- put forward your own ideas, especially if they are different from the ones you have heard in lectures
- challenge the ideas of others, but do it politely
- encourage others to speak
- listen actively and attentively.

Remember that the responsibility for a successful small group is shared by all the participants.

What is a workshop?

Workshops provide another form of small group learning and teaching. They differ from tutorials and seminars in that they are 'doing' sessions rather than 'discussion' sessions. Workshops are directed towards practising skills and usually involve the whole class in planned activities of different kinds. To get the most out of workshops, it is vital to prepare so that you can attempt the tasks set and complete them during class time. Workshops are usually at least two hours in duration. They form an important element of skills-based subjects, and attendance is usually compulsory. An important learning task in workshops is working with others.

Effective listening in tutorials, seminars, and workshops

Working in small groups can provide you with information, ideas, and a wide variety of viewpoints, but only if you listen to what your colleagues are saying and make sure they have a chance to say it. The listening skills you need for small group discussions are additional to the ones you need in lectures.

- *Take turns.* You must allow others to finish what they want to say before giving your own point of view. Never interrupt, but patiently wait your turn.
- *Listen to the whole message.* Look at the speaker; suspend judgment; and take note of the speaker's tone of voice, body language, and underlying feelings before you make any judgments about what the person is saying.

- *Provide feedback.* Show interest while the speaker is talking and offer an honest response when he or she is finished. If you disagree, do so calmly and politely, offering evidence for your point of view and reasons for your disagreement. Ask questions about anything you do not understand.
- *Take notes where appropriate.* If a class member is giving a paper it might help you to respond if you jot down a few points as the paper is being presented. It might also help you to remember the main thrust of the paper later. It is more interesting for everyone in the class if there is discussion of seminar papers, and it is certainly more satisfying for the person giving the paper.

LEARNING AND LISTENING

In all the new situations you encounter at university, active learning is the key to success, and effective listening is a crucial part of active learning and clear communication. You can practise your listening skills in all the formal teaching situations that are part of your course, and this will help you to learn more easily.

Walt Whitman has pointed out that, 'To have great poets, there must be great audiences too'. If you think that a lecture or a small group discussion is boring, or you feel as though you have not learned anything, ask yourself whether you have been hearing without listening. If the answer is 'yes', then the problem is at least partly your fault, and you can do something about it.