

How to Win as an Open Learner

How to Succeed on your Open Learning Course

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Third Edition

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BACKGROUND

The first edition of 'How to Win as an Open Learner' was published in the UK by the Council for Educational Technology, (CET) London as long ago as 1986. The book was inexpensive, small, and bright orange, with merry cartoons by Rosi Drew. The book was primarily written at this stage as a guide for open learners working through print-based learning materials.

Ten years later, in 1996, I published the 2nd edition with what had then become the National Council for Educational Technology, (NCET), Coventry, and included additional material about approaches to learning, and fine-tuned the content on the basis of ten years experience, and extended the scope to include learning with information and communications technologies.

The book went out of print during the 1990s, as NCET was transformed into other directions, particularly relating to learning technologies rather than open learning. However, since then I have had many requests to make 'How to Win as an Open Learner' available again, not least in the context of the large increase in the amount of open learning now going on in the age of online learning. However, this 3rd edition of the book continues to focus very much on the *learning* side of things, as it remains (in my opinion) by far the most important aspect to address, whether people are learning from print-based, computer-based, or online resources. While there are many other guides aiming to help people to succeed with the technological aspects of resource-based learning, I still feel that people need help to simply become better at learning in their own way, at their own pace, and at times and places of their own choosing.

This 3rd edition retains those parts of its predecessors which continue to be relevant to open learners today. I have, however, taken the opportunity to develop further the key features of the original editions, in particular the self-analysis questions and feedback responses, and the checklists of intended learning outcomes associated with each of the eight sections of the book. To make room for these, however, the cartoons have had to go – sorry!

I hope that this new edition may continue to help open learners simply to become better at being open learners.

Phil Race
June 2004

BEFORE YOU START...

Congratulations, you're about to become an open learner. Perhaps you're already one. You might be learning from printed materials. You might be learning using computers. Indeed you might be heading towards being an online open learner. Either way, learning can be fun. Learning *should* be enjoyable. I want to help you get the most satisfaction and success out of learning. I've written this little guide to help you learn effectively – to help you to guarantee your success. I'm also hoping this little booklet will help you to learn efficiently – getting the maximum pay-off for the time you spend learning (as I'm sure you've got all sorts of other things in your busy life, and don't want to waste time in the ways you learn). I can't do your learning for you however, you'll still need to make some effort, there's no way out of that. I hope this booklet will help make sure that your efforts give you high learning payoff, and are well directed.

HOW DO YOU LEARN?

In recent years I've asked thousands of people four questions about how they learn. Let me try them on you. Fill in your own answers to these questions in the table below – but don't look ahead. Don't cheat! When you've answered these questions yourself, we'll explore the implications of your answers together.

Question	Your answer
1. Think of something you know that you're good at – yes, anything at all will do. How did you become good at this – jot down up to six words opposite.	
2. Now think of something you <i>feel</i> good about – something about yourself that you feel positive or proud about. Again it doesn't matter what it is. <i>How do you know</i> you can feel good about it – what's your evidence supporting this good feeling? Jot down a few words opposite.	
3. Think of something you're <i>not</i> good at – anything will do. This time, jot down a few words about what went wrong when you tried to learn this. Also decide whether anyone was to blame for this – and if so, who?	
4. Finally, think of something you have indeed learned successfully, but at the time you didn't <i>want</i> to learn it. This could be anything – driving, swimming, or a particular subject. Choose something where you're now <i>glad</i> you learned it – it's useful to you now. What kept you going, and helped you to succeed with this? Jot down a few words opposite.	

DISCUSSION OF YOUR ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS 1-4

Now let's look at some of the most common answers people give to those four questions. Compare what you wrote with my comments below.

Most people mention *practice!* Many mention lots and lots of practice! Another common answer is 'learning by trial and error'. So the first conclusion we can draw is that learning involves *doing*, not just sitting reading about things. Learning from mistakes is absolutely fine (as long as we make our mistakes at the right time, and learn from them).

For this question, just about everyone mentions something along the lines of 'other people's reaction'. 'feedback from other people', 'seeing results for myself' and so on. So, the second conclusion we come to is that we all need *feedback* to find out how our learning is going.

This is where many people mention bad teaching! They also mention things like 'not wanting to learn in the first place', 'lack of confidence', and 'not being able to understand things'. We can therefore conclude that for successful learning, it's important that we *want* to learn (not surprising, is it?) We can also conclude that we need to make *sense* of what we learn – get our heads round it. I like to call this 'digesting'. It's a bit like digesting your lunch! We need to extract the 'goodness' out of everything we try to learn (and we equally need to discard the roughage sooner or later – the facts and figures that we don't need to remember, all those things that were just a means to getting our heads around the important things).

People give three main categories of answer to Question 4. Some people are kept going by strong support and encouragement. If that's you, I hope that this little booklet will help to keep you going. Others are kept going by not wanting to be found lacking by other people – not wanting to be seen *not* able to do things. If this is you, these other people will keep you going, at least to some extent. But the most common answer is along the lines "I needed to learn this, so I could go on and do something I really wanted to do". In other words, necessity is the mother of a lot of learning.

WHAT SORT OF BOOKLET IS THIS?

As it's about how to be a successful open learner, I've written this booklet as a miniature open learning package. You'll find out more about what open learning is as you work through this booklet, but for the moment Let's look at three features of the booklet that relate to how you learn best.

1 SELF ANALYSIS QUESTIONS (SAQs) AND RESPONSES

There's one of these in each of the sections of this book. They're similar to the 'Self-Assessment Questions' you're likely to find in open learning materials, but these ones are about *you* so I've called them Self *Analysis* Questions. Each of these gives you something to do – *learning by doing*. Usually, in these questions I ask you to make your own choices from a number of options.

It doesn't stop there though: you need *feedback* on what you do. That's why at the end of each section of the booklet I've written *Responses* to the SAQs. In these Responses, I've given you my comments on each of the options, in response to the option(s) you choose. So as well as having a Response to your choice, you can also see what I would have said to you if you'd chosen any of the other options too.

'Why can't I cheat?' you may be thinking. Well, you can! But reading my responses *before* you've really thought about each of the options is not the way to get the best out of this book. I can't really give you feedback on your choices if you've not actually done some choosing. In many of the Responses, I give you further ideas to ponder about. Pondering is a useful learning activity – a lot better than just reading,

2 CHECKLISTS OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

There's one of these at the end of each section, just before my Responses to the SAQ. You may wonder why I didn't put these intended learning outcomes at the beginning of each section. This is because I've designed each section to be a journey of exploration for you about *yourself* and how you learn. If I'd alerted you in advance to what we were going to cover, the spirit of discovery would have gone for you. When you come to each checklist of intended learning outcomes, don't just read it. Use it actively. Beside each intended learning outcome make your own notes and comments, for example decide whether you reckon you've achieved each intended outcome. You may also add some further intended outcomes along the lines: 'In future, I'm going to make sure that I...'

3 ACTIVITIES

I've designed an Activity for you to do at the end of each section. This gives you further opportunities to *learn by doing* and to get some more practice in. Sometimes in these Activities you'll be able to enlist the help of a friend, colleague or relative to get some *feedback* to help you judge how successful your work on the Activity has been. Sometimes you'll have a good idea about this without anyone's help.

Many of the activities are in bits: a bit to do straight away after finishing the section, then a bit to do a few days later, perhaps. You can, of course, choose to skip the Activities – but that's hardly a wise decision if you're convinced by now that *learning by doing* and *getting feedback* are essential stages in successful learning, and that the extra practice that these Activities give you will help you in *digesting* the essence of each section.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE?

Some open learning packages are print-based, as is this little book. Others are computer-based, where you work at a machine. Others are online, where you work at a computer that's connected to other computers – and perhaps to the whole world of the Internet. However, all open learning is interactive in one way or another, giving you things to do, feedback on what you've done, and opportunities for further practice. All of these media are *open learning media*. They all allow you to learn by having a go. They can all give you feedback on what you do. The important difference between print-based and computer-based open learning is that you can't easily carry a computer around with you absolutely everywhere you go – perhaps this is the one advantage of print-based learning resources. What you have to remember when using high-tech learning media is to keep polishing your learning up when you're away from the technology, and not just assume that because you had it cracked today that it will still be with you tomorrow.

HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW?

How many good ideas have you had, only to forget about them later? As you work through this booklet for the first time, you'll discover all sorts of *good intentions* that you wish to bring to bear on your studying. When you find that you gain something really useful from a section, don't let it evaporate away again. This little booklet isn't meant to be read once then put on your shelf. Keep it handy and skim through it again and again, just to remind yourself of your good intentions. The checklist of intended outcomes can help you keep these good intentions in mind. You can have another go at any of the SAQs and Activities any time you want – and see how your skills as an open learner are continuing to develop.

Section 1

WHAT'S OPEN LEARNING, ANYWAY?

You're about to become an 'open learner', or better still, you may already have been one. However, if this is your first time, it's worth us looking at some of the differences between open learning and 'conventional' learning.

Basically, we can regard conventional learning (such as happens in classrooms and colleges) as 'closed' in certain ways. For example, the pace is usually chosen by teachers or lecturers. Which bit of the subject is covered at any given minute is chosen by such people. How much detail is gone into is chosen by them, and so on. More than this, the location is fixed – the learners have to be there to take part. The time is fixed – teachers may get cross when learners come in late!

Open learning programmes give as many as possible of the choices available to the learners themselves – and now that's going to be you! Let's imagine there were such a thing as a '100 per cent 'open' programme. Learners would have control – complete control – over all sorts of decisions.

Imagine being able to decide all the following things for yourself:

What to learn

Where to learn

When to learn

How fast to learn it

How much to learn

Whether to miss out bits you don't like

Whether to have your learning tested

How to have your learning tested

When to have your learning tested

Whether to use the help of a tutor

Whether to work with fellow learners

Whether to do any practical or 'hands on' work

Whether to decide to give up learning

Whether to bother to start at all!

Now, I guess you'll agree with me that if you have all of these choices, it would be very easy to fall by the wayside – or even not to start learning at all. So most open learning programmes don't try to give you all of these responsibilities. A good open learning programme intends to leave you quite a lot of freedom to manage your own learning. This means that in many ways you're in charge. However, there is usually support and help provided for you. So, to sum up, open learning gives you more control and more responsibility. We'll look at the responsibilities in a little while, then at the advantages that come with them. Before that, however, something for you to do.

I'm calling the question that follows a 'Self Analysis Question'. It's got the initials SAQ. Most open learning materials have some sort of 'SAQs' but usually the letters stand for Self Assessment Question. These are questions that get you to do something, then allow you to compare what you've done with a feedback response built in to the materials (or appearing on-screen, for example when you pick an option from a multiple-choice question when doing computer-based open learning). In our case, I use the term 'self-analysis' rather than 'self-assessment' for a reason. My questions are to get you to think – to analyse yourself. There may not be a totally 'right' answer to these questions – it's your thinking that's important. So, let's stop talking about these questions, and meet one!

SAQ 1

Why have you chosen to be an open learner, rather than use more traditional methods of studying? In the Table below, pick the options that fit your reasons, entering your choices in the boxes at the right-hand side. Then, after making your choices, look at what I've said about each option (not just the ones you chose) at the end of the section.

I've chosen to become an <i>open</i> learner because:			
Reasons:	√	×	Not sure!
There is no 'conventional' course available.			
I can't fit a conventional course into my lifestyle or routine.			
I don't like conventional courses!			
I want to work at my own pace.			
I want to work at places of my own choosing, for example at home and/or at work.			
My boss told me to do the course!			
Someone told me that it was a good way of studying.			
I've got my own reasons (enter these below)			

After you've made your choice in SAQs like the one above, please turn to the end of the booklet (page xx) and see what I've said in reply to the options you chose. It could also be useful to read my replies to the options you *didn't* choose – you may find that your reasons for *not* choosing these options were good ones too.

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT RESPONSIBILITIES?

Yes, you've got them, as an open learner. Let's look at a few. We'll go through some of the main ones, one at a time, putting them in the form of questions that you'll be asking yourself from time to time as you proceed with your open learning. And I'll give you short answers to each of these questions – very short answers for the moment!

When shall I start work as an open learner? Answer: its up to you! But remember its easier to say 'tomorrow' than to dive in today. If you're ever going to start, the answer has to be 'now' on one occasion. We'll explore this business of getting started a bit more in Section 3 of this guide.

When will I do my learning? Answer: its up to you! It really doesn't matter when, if you are learning well enough. We'll take up this question too in some detail in Section 3.

Where shall I do my open learning? Answer: its up to you! But don't wait until you find the ideal place – you may never find it! We'll explore some possibilities in Section 4.

I guess you get the point – the answers are all up to you! In this booklet, I'll take you through all of these issues in more depth, and give you a few suggestions that can make your choices a little clearer. In fact, if you look at the titles of all the sections of the booklet, they're all hinting at things that are ultimately up to you.

WHAT ADVANTAGES DO I GET FROM OPEN LEARNING?

You get freedom. Along with the responsibilities we've mentioned, you get freedom to make your own choices. What sort of choices? Five sorts (at least), as follows.

Choice of pace. You can choose your *own* pace. You can go over things until you're quite confident about them. You don't need to be swamped by something before you've understood the basics that the something depends on. You can stop and go and look something up. If you're finding something easy to get to grips with, you can *forge* ahead at a great rate of knots. You don't have to wait for a teacher to catch up. You don't have to wait till your fellow learners catch up with you.

Choice of place. You don't have to waste time travelling to a fixed room to do your learning in. You can do much of your learning where you choose to do it – at home, at work, just about anywhere.

Choice of time. You have control over when you learn. You haven't got to be tied by fixed lecture times on fixed days of fixed weeks. You can even choose to learn after everyone's gone to sleep – or maybe even before anyone's woken up.

Choice of company. You can, if you choose, enjoy privacy in your learning. What I mean is that, when you're first beginning to wrestle with something new, you needn't feel you're going to be ridiculed for struggling. You can quietly stick at it till you've got it firmly under your belt, and then you may be ready for more 'public' scrutiny – for example sending an assignment to a tutor. If you find while studying that you need to go and look something up, you can just do that. In a live class, you may have felt you looked silly because you didn't know whatever it was. As an open learner, there's no one to think you're silly, except occasionally yourself (but that's not a bad thing as long as you're reasonably kind to yourself). Alternatively, of course, you can do at least some of your open learning along with other people who are doing the same programme – either face-to-face with them, or (if it's an online learning programme) in their 'virtual' company.

Choice of 'teacher': the learning materials. You have the advantage that the authors chosen to write most open learning courses are not just any old writers. They have to be recognised experts in their field to be commissioned to write courses in the first place. Also, they have to be able to write. Not just 'writing', but composing course materials in the special way to keep you active and interested as you work on your own. Writing like this is a very demanding task. Authors have to be very careful indeed to avoid any ambiguities in their text. There's no one to help you sort it out if something is unclear, so they have to write so as to be as understandable as possible. This in turn makes your own job of *learning* from their writing much easier.

This means that many open learning programmes are of a much higher quality than the average 'taught' equivalent. So as an open learner, you should be getting the best!

CHOOSING YOUR OPEN LEARNING COURSE

This isn't as easy as you may think! It would take a whole book to spell out all the various things you should take into account when making such a choice! However, I'll give you a checklist of things you could try to do when making your selection.

- Check the 'prerequisites': make sure you know what you need to know to start on the materials – check that you're *able* to start where the course starts from.
- Check the published intended learning outcomes of the open learning course: make sure these match your own needs and expectations.
- Check there is plenty of interaction in the learning materials, such as self assessment questions for you to practice on, activities for you to do, practical exercises if appropriate, and so on.
- Try to find someone who has already studied using the materials concerned, and ask how it went. Ask what the best thing about it has been for them. And ask what they found to be the worst thing about it – forewarned is forearmed!
- Check that all the material is readily available and not just 'in preparation'! Sometimes with open learning courses, Volume 1 is published before Volume 3 has even been written!
- Check whether there's tutorial support: this depends, of course, on whether you want such support, or whether you may indeed *need* such support to keep you going.
- Check where the material is leading to: for example what can you go on to (if you wish) after you've done it?
- Last (but not least), check that the material is *readable* and *interesting*. Get hold of the materials and test this out. You should *enjoy* working with it and not find it hard going or boring.

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Now that we've dabbled with the meaning of open learning in general terms, how well do you now feel yourself to be able to do the following things? Make your decisions in the table which follows.

Intended learning outcomes of Section 1: How well can you...	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can't quite do this yet!
Explain the ways that 'traditional' learning schemes are often 'closed' in various respects?			
Make a list of some of the responsibilities that fall on your shoulders as an open learner?			
Enjoy the advantages you have as an open learner (and recognise some of the drawbacks, which we'll try to resolve together later in this guide)?			

ACTIVITY 1

Below, I've given a short list of some of the features that are present in good open learning materials – whether print-based or online. These features aren't usually around in conventional textbooks or training courses. If you've already got some open learning materials (or easy access to some) have a go at this activity. If not, please go straight ahead to Section 2.

Go through a few pages of your open learning materials, look for these features and decide how useful (or otherwise, of course) they will be to you personally. You can then put ticks beside the listed points below which will help you.

Good features of my open learning materials	✓ or ✗
Nice friendly tone, easy to read.	
Self assessment questions present, giving me the chance to try to do things.	
Responses to self assessment questions present, giving me the chance to check that I'm on the right track – and putting me right if I'm not.	
Space for me to write my own notes on the materials.	
Spaces left for me to write down my answers to questions.	
Intended learning outcomes spelled out in a useful way, helping me to see exactly that it is I'm supposed to become able to do.	
Useful summaries given, helping me to see what the important things really are.	
Activities built in every now and then, giving me the chance to go and apply what I'm learning.	

Section 2**WHY ARE YOU LEARNING?**

(Let's make sure you have some good reasons for learning – there'll be times when you need them!)

People learn for all sorts of reasons. Some are better than others. Let's go straight into *your* reasons for learning, just as they are at this moment. You can re-visit this chapter at different times during your studies to follow how your reasons for learning may indeed develop and change. Have a go at SAQ 2 below.

SAQ 2

Human beings don't often put in a lot of energy and effort without good reasons. Let's see what could be priming *you* to invest in your studying just now. Why are you learning at all? Choose which (one or more) of the following options apply most closely to you. Then look at my response to each of the options you may have chosen, and think about the comments I offer about these. You may also find it useful to look at my comments to the options you didn't choose too, to see whether you've rejected these options for good reasons.

I'm studying because:

Options	4 or 8
I was bored and needed a challenge.	
The topic I'm studying will be useful to me in my job.	
Mastering this topic could lead me to promotion.	
Mastering this topic could lead to more choice in the jobs I could expect to get.	
Someone told me to study the topic concerned.	
I've always wanted to study this topic, and now's my chance.	
I simply like learning new things.	
A friend or colleague studied it, and seemed to enjoy it.	
I want to prove to someone that I'm better than he or she thinks I am!	
I want to prove to myself that I'm up to it.	
I tried this in the past and didn't succeed, so now I want to prove I can do it.	
I want to be able to keep up with my children, and help them in their studies.	
I've got other reasons of my own (jot these down below to remind you what they are):	

Now we've looked at a number of possible reasons for studying. There are probably as many different reasons as there are learners – and we're all learners! Don't worry that some of my responses to the options in the SAQ ended on something of a 'warning', note; I wanted to get you thinking about how your reasons for learning would stand up to pressure. You'll have seen from my responses to the options you chose in the SAQ how well your reasons are going to serve you. You may even have found some new and better reasons for learning. If so, I'm glad.

The fact remains that we need reasons for doing demanding things like studying. The more reasons the better. When things get a bit tough, these reasons can be the driving force that keeps us on course. Let's face it, it's bound to be tough now and then – anything worthwhile is. Imagine if universities gave all students who lived there for three years a degree, no matter how little they worked? A degree would be quote worthless. There wouldn't be any point in studying for one.

Ultimately, the only person who can assess how good your reasons for learning are now is – yourself. That's why I'm not going to say any more apart from the comments I made in the responses to the SAQ. If I helped you, in these questions and responses, to reappraise and upgrade your motives, well and good!

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Now that you've 'psychoanalysed' your motives, you could now be sadder (surely not!), wiser (of course) and more likely to keep your nose to the grindstone. How well can you now achieve the following intended outcomes of this Section?

Intended learning outcomes of Section 2:	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can't quite do this yet!
How well can you...			
Recite some good reason for sticking to your studies, convincingly enough to keep you at them even on those dark days we all get from time to time?			
Feel a sense of purpose in what you are doing?			
Abandon any 'bad' reasons you might have had (or at least turn them in to better reasons)?			

ACTIVITY 2

Now that we've been through various good, and not-so-good, reasons for studying, use the Table below to jot down your top three reasons for embarking on your open learning studies – those that will stand the tests of time and circumstance.

My top three reasons for being an open learner:

1

2

3

After drafting your own top three reasons as above, take a small piece of paper or card and copy down the reasons you personally have ended up with, and stick your list up somewhere where you will see it every day. Whether you choose a 'public' or 'private' site for your list will depend whether your reasons are ones that you can share with friends or relatives; that doesn't matter. The main thing is that your reasons should keep you going.

Section 3

WHEN WILL YOU LEARN?

(I, too could do with a 30-hour day sometimes!)

Learning takes time! That's obvious enough. The problem is finding the time. You probably had a full and busy life before you decided to do some open learning – I doubt if you found yourself twiddling your thumbs! All the things that kept you busy before will still be around – they don't magically disappear just because you're now going to do some studying. Actually, finding the time to learn is only part of the way towards successful learning. What is even more important is being able to make the most effective use of what time you can find. That's where I hope to help you – not only in this section but throughout this guide. Let's see what your time-management intentions look like at this particular point in time.

SAQ 3

How do you see yourself timetabling your study patterns? Which of the following is closest to your way of doing things? Which of the following tastes or inclinations are likely to shape *your* particular strategy for managing your study time? Please complete the table below – as honestly as you can.

Time-management tendencies or inclinations...	This is very like me!	This is sometimes like me.	No, this isn't me at all.
I like to plan a nice tight schedule for studying, for example: Mondays, 7.15 – 9.00 p.m., Wednesdays, 6.00 – 8.00 p.m. and so on.			
I tend to work in bursts when the mood takes me. I don't like the idea of regimenting my study times!			
I've got a busy week, so I'll have to study at weekends. I expect I'll be able to fit one or two long spells of study into most weekends.			
I'll study whenever there's nothing else crying out to be done.			
I can fit in half-an-hour of study now and then at work, so I'll build studying into most days alongside work.			
I do quite a bit of travelling. I expect I'll be able to fit some studying into my journeys.			
None of the above fits me. The way I'll work is as follows (jot it down please):			

Now that you've had a go at SAQ 3, turn to my Response (on page xx) and see what I've said in reply to the option (or options) which you chose as being 'very like me' – you may be in for some surprises!

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO DO SOME STUDYING?

Two hours, Half a day? I prefer the answer to be in minutes! A small number of minutes in fact! It's surprising what we can learn in a very short time. It's equally surprising how little we sometimes learn, given a long spell of studying. What happens? Do you know what I mean by 'drifting'? One can sit at a desk, hour after hour, with the regular sound of pages being turned, with very little real work happening! Has this happened to you? You might as well have been enjoying yourself doing something else, rather than sitting for hours kidding yourself you were working. The danger is particularly bad when reading. Reading can so easily be a very passive activity. Enjoyable it may be, but to be *useful* it has to be made active. More of that later in this guide.

So, our minds seem to do the *real* work in quite short bursts. Perhaps about an hour may be the most that our minds can really concentrate on so demanding a task as learning something new (my mind sometimes manages about 20 minutes, unless it's something very routine that I'm doing). Our brains rebel or switch off if we try to make them concentrate for a long time. Then, putting off starting some study until a suitable two-hour spell is available is not such a splendid idea. In fact, waiting for a suitably long spell to become available is really often just an excuse to put off the moment of starting to study! There's always something useful you can do in a few minutes. True, you can't learn Einstein's theory of relativity in a few minutes, but you can always check through something you've already learned and make sure it's still 'there'.

There are certainly some advantages to having a regular study routine – so long as the routine doesn't become too rigid. If it's rigid, sooner or later you'll rebel against it and then feel a sense of failure. You could feel that you haven't lived up to your expectations. To avoid this happening, your routine needs to be able to allow you to work more when you have time to spare or are particularly enthusiastic about the topic you're studying. The routine also needs to allow you to work less when you have other crises to deal with.

The key ingredient in a routine you can live with is *flexibility*. For example, you could plan half a dozen study periods in a week, with the proviso that you want, on average, to use four of them each week. When you really feel like studying, you could use all six. You could earn yourself some time off in advance when you knew next week was going to have more pressures on you and less time for study.

Remembering the shortness of our average concentration span, each study period needs to have variety built in to it. A change is as good as a rest. We'll explore the ways you can build in changes later in this guide. The study periods themselves can be kept short. A lot of short bursts of activity tend to work better than a few rather long boring ones. It's much easier to fit short spells of studying into a busy lifestyle anyway.

WHAT ABOUT ALL THOSE OTHER JOBS?

'No, I can't start learning today, I've simply got to do 'x' first'.

'I'll do some learning after I've got 'x' out of the way'.

Be honest, there are always going to be things you can use for the 'x'. Possibly some of these things have been waiting for a long time to get done. Sometimes they may be urgent. Suppose you had an urgent job that had to be done by tomorrow; let's say it would take two hours, for the sake of argument. Let's look at three ways of dealing with it.

A: Do the urgent job, leave studying till another day.

B: Do the urgent job, and fit in another half an hour of study after it's done.

C: Do half an hour's worth of study first, and then do the urgent job.

Well, you can see what's wrong with A. It is possible to put off studying indefinitely that way!

B is more dangerous. What if the job takes more than two hours? Goodbye studying. Even if the urgent job gets done easily enough, will you really honour your intention to get that half hour in afterwards? You may be tired or another urgent job might have come up meanwhile!

How about C? It takes a bit of courage to postpone the urgent job for a while. But the studying *does* then get done! And what about the urgent job? Well, that gets done too – after all it has to get done by tomorrow. And you’ve got the advantage of studying while you’re fresh, rather than when you are tired after doing the urgent job. So, a useful policy is: ‘Do a bit of studying *before* whatever else you simply must do’.

It’s surprising how quickly these bits of studying add up to something very worthwhile. In fact, many of the so-called urgent jobs turn out to be excuses for not starting studying! By doing the studying first, you don’t let yourself be cheated by them. You actually use the urgent jobs to help you study because, before you start on each such job, you put in a bit more studying! Simple isn’t it? You probably agree with me at the moment but will you put the idea into practice? The choice is yours – no one can force you. As an open learner, you’re free to choose whichever way to learn (including the hard ways!) any time you wish!

EVEN ODDER BITS OF TIME!

Let me tell you a true story. When I was first at college, I had a 40 minute bus journey each way. One of my subjects was ‘Chemical Kinetics’. There happened to be a good, pocket-sized textbook on that subject. Somehow, I got into the habit of letting that book live in my jacket pocket. On every journey – no, I *didn’t* read the book for 40 minutes! What I did was to look at something in it for maybe a couple of minutes. Then I’d put it away again and continue reading everyone else’s newspapers within eyeshot on the bus!

Anyway, after two terms came the exams. I sat down to start to learn ‘Chemical Kinetics’ and found that I already knew it well. I could ‘think’ myself up on to the top deck of the bus and see diagrams, derivations and explanations in my mind’s eye. It would probably have taken me at least 30 hours to learn the subject from scratch and I’d saved myself all that time just by a couple of minutes here and there – *regularly*.

Have you any such odd bits of time? You’re bound to have. The secret is to have something *with you* that you can do during those odd minutes. It doesn’t have to be a book. Something written on a postcard or a folded sheet of paper would do. There’s a saying, ‘If you want a good job done, give it to a busy person’. Could it be that such people have mastered the art of using odd bits of time? I think so.

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Now that we’ve explored the question of ‘When will you learn?’, how well do you now feel able to achieve the following outcomes?

Intended learning outcomes of Section 3: How well can you...	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can’t quite do this yet!
1. Agree that all your best reasons regarding when you <i>can’t</i> learn may have simply been excuses?			

2. Adopt a studying regime that matches your personality – one you can stick to?			
3. Maximise the usefulness of odd bits of time?			
4. Realise that the real question isn't 'Am I studying for long enough?' but is 'Am I doing sufficient useful work?'. (In Section 5 we'll explore how you can answer this question).			

ACTIVITY 3

This Activity is in three stages. If you don't start it, you won't finish it, so first of all *decide* to start it now!

- Set yourself a target for the total number of study hours which you intend to put in, for the week beginning *now*. No, next week won't do! Jot this number down below:
 .
- Prepare yourself a sheet of paper to log in times actually spent studying in the week beginning now. Don't include any time you indulge in, just *thinking* about starting to do some studying – stick to the actual times you spend studying.
- After your week is up, check how well it worked, and record your answers to the following questions in the table below.

Questions:	Yes	No	Don't know!
Was my target a realistic one?			
Did I meet this target?			
Did I actually <i>exceed</i> my target?			
Did the fact I was logging my studying time actually help me to do more studying than I otherwise might have done?			
Will it be useful for me to continue to log my time spent studying?			
What else have I learned about myself from this experiment?			

Section 4

WHERE WILL YOU DO YOUR STUDYING?

(Have you already got yourself an executive-style study?)

I often ask college-based students ‘where will you do your studying?’. After all, even on a full-time college course, not much of the real learning happens during class time. Students still need to do a lot of work on their own. If I ask the question of a large group of students, you can bet that their answers will be roughly like this: some will say ‘in my study-bedroom’; others will say ‘in the library’; many will say ‘at home, on the dining room table’; some will say ‘wherever I can’.

Now, you’re an open learner. You may not have the sort of study-bedroom that some college students have (those, that is, who are lucky enough to get in to halls of residence). You probably won’t have the same sort of access to a library. At least, it could be difficult to carry all your learning materials in and out of your local library any time you choose. So, Let’s see how you’re fixed regarding where you’ll be studying.

If you’re doing your open learning online, you will also need to make sure that some of your study time is beside a computer which is networked to your learning materials, and perhaps to tutor support, or assessment provision. In other words, you can’t just learn anywhere at all – or at least you can’t do *everything* anywhere.

SAQ 4

Which of the following is nearest to your situation regarding where you’ll be doing most of your learning? Look through the following options, and decide which are closest to your position. Then look through my responses to these particular options.

Where will you do your studying?			
Options	This is very like my situation	This is partly like my situation	This isn’t my situation
1. I’ll have to sort out a suitable study area at home.			
2. I’ve no problem, I’ve already got a good place for studying at home.			
3. I’ll have to go out to study, maybe to a library or some such place.			
4. I’ll be doing much of my studying at work, where I have a suitable place.			
5. I’ve got a garden shed! Are you suggesting that I turn this into a study?			
6. I’m an online learner, so most of my learning will have to be done at a computer – whether at home or at work.			
7. Help! I really don’t know where I’m going to find space to do my learning.			

GETTING STARTED!

Suppose you have somewhere to study (it doesn't matter where for the moment). Imagine you've just arrived at your desk or table and you're going to do some studying - Let's say for an hour or so. How do you start? Let's get one thing straight – if you don't actually *start*, you certainly won't finish.

How do *you* get yourself started? Perhaps you tidy up the table a bit first. Then maybe you get together all the learning materials you may be using, and pens and paper. Maybe you'll need a calculator or some drawing instruments, so out they come. Then, perhaps, you get a cup of coffee on to the front right-hand corner of your desk, to sustain you during your efforts. Maybe next, you put turn on a radio or CD player on the back of the desk and get a suitable background sound going, or put your headphones on and get your portable system going. You'll need oxygen during your studies, so perhaps you open the window a bit. Then, because the air coming in is rather cool, you adjust the heating. On your way back to the desk, you notice that you haven't cleaned your shoes for a few weeks and rectify that.

See what I'm getting at? Have you caught yourself spending ages rearranging your learning environment before getting down to some real work? Believe me, I've caught myself. I can assure you it is perfectly possible to postpone the real work for a whole hour – a whole day – a whole week – possibly a lifetime! I now call all the distractions 'AWAS' – standing for 'Advanced Work Avoidance Strategies'! What's *your* favourite AWAS? Are you still going to be taken for a ride by it now that you've diagnosed it?

Why do we do things like this? Is it because we have to get our minds 'in gear' ready for that dreaded moment of actually starting work? Partly, but I think we sort out the bits and pieces because all these other activities are *easier* than actually doing some work. They are *excuses* for not starting – not reasons.

I now try to do as follows. Even if my desk is cluttered (it usually is), I push back the clutter to make enough room for what I'm about to read. We can only read one thing at a time. I make room for the paper I'm going to write on, pick up a pen and start! Or more often these days I open a new document on my wordprocessor, and type in 'First rough draft' at the top of the page. I'll then keep working for maybe ten minutes or so. If I stop and think whether it's still urgent to tidy up the desk – usually it isn't. Usually I'm by now absorbed with what I'm doing. Even when I do decide to tidy up the desk, the things I've been working with for the ten minutes will be going through my mind. We all need time to ponder things. No one can concentrate for long periods. So now and then I take a few minutes off and tidy up, get the coffee, choose the CD, adjust the heating and so on.

SO WHERE IS THE BEST PLACE TO STUDY?

Think back to my responses to the options you thought about in SAQ 4. I made cautionary comments about most kinds of places for studying. There's an even more important danger.

Imagine you have got an excellent place (home, work, wherever) - somewhere that really suits you. You study efficiently there. What happens when you're *not* there? Do you use the fact that you're not in your ideal place as a reason not to bother trying to study? "I'll wait till I get back to where I can really make progress" you might say (or pretend). Is that a reason? It's an excuse.

My advice is to become able to do a bit of studying almost wherever you are. And as I said about online learning, the best online learners are really good at offline learning too. Make

studying a real part of your whole life, not just something that happens in a particular room. That said, there are advantages in having a ‘safe’ area for studying – an area that family and friends will recognise as a “please don’t disturb me here” place.

Am I suggesting that you carry around all your learning materials with you all over the place? No I’m not. All you need with you is a little something related to your studies. Later in this guide we’ll go into what the ‘something’ can be. You’ll find that there are many possibilities. The more you can make the ‘something’ to be small and pocket-able, the more likely it is that you’ll use it during those odd few minutes. You’ll become more able to do useful little bits of studying even in the oddest places!

WORKING IN ODD PLACES!

Let’s imagine there’s one vital bit of information you really have to learn well. It may only take five minutes to do it. Suppose it’s night and it’s raining outside. Imagine you do this (don’t do it, just think about it!): pick up an umbrella, go outside with the bit you’re going to learn, spend five minutes learning it, then come back in (never mind the neighbours!). Now my guess is that you’d remember that bit of learning very efficiently. Simply because you’d done something so different, it would stick in your mind.

That might have been an extreme example, but do you see the principle involved? It’s to do with ‘association’. If you can ‘hook up’ the thing you’re wanting to remember to something else memorable, it’s much easier to recall the thing concerned. Obviously I’m not suggesting that you do all of your learning in unusual places. But, if you have something with you and a few spare minutes, there’s no reason for not doing a bit wherever you are, when the mood takes you. If you didn’t have something with you, you wouldn’t have the choice of doing a bit. In fact, then you’d have a reason for *not* doing anything? No, an *excuse!*

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Now that we’ve explored the question of ‘Where will you do your studying?’, have you abandoned the search for a learner’s paradise? How well do you now feel able to achieve the following outcomes?

Intended learning outcomes of Section 4: How well do you now feel you can ...	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can’t quite do this yet!
1. Make the most of the various learning environments available to you?			
2. Explore what can be done with ‘unlikely’ learning environments?			
3. Start learning straight away, rather than do a lot of sorting out first?			
4. If you’re an online learner, become an offline learner too?			

5. Blend your studies into the whole of your lifestyle, rather than confining them to a 'tidy corner' of your life?			
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ACTIVITY 4

- | |
|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">(1) Make a plan to study for let's say a quarter of an hour in each of three places you've not used before for studying. Stick to your plan and see how it goes in the three places.(2) After a week or two, spend five minutes just thinking back to what you learned in those three places. Decide for yourself whether any or all of the different environments helped you to remember what you learned on those three occasions. Which worked best, and why?(3) (Optional!) If you happen to be in a position to observe a friend or colleague studying (no matter what), see whether he or she wastes the time 'sorting out the bits and pieces' before really getting started. If so, tell the person concerned about it – or decide you'd better not mention it! (No one likes being found out!) |
|---|

Section 5

HOW WILL YOU MAKE YOUR STUDYING REALLY EFFICIENT?

('Enjoyment got through studying is proportional to the square of your efficiency' – Phil's First Law!)

We've already noticed that it's possible to sit at a desk (or anywhere else) trying to learn, even pretending to learn. It's possible to have been trying for hours and for nothing much to have happened in your head. We're now going to find ways of stopping such wastage of your time. We'll look at ways of getting things to stay in your head.

Is your memory not what you'd like it to be? Try this. Think of a meal you had yesterday – say the main one of the day. Suppose I asked you to write down *everything* about that meal. Think about it for one minute now (don't write it but do stop for that minute and think).

What went through your mind? You could have thought in that minute of all sorts of things. For example, you may well still have in your mind the answers to most of the following questions – and many more.

- What did you eat?
- Was it good or not?
- Was it hot or cold?
- What colours were the food?
- Where were you eating it?
- Who else was there?
- What did you say?
- What did other people say?
- What did you think of what they said?
- What was on your mind as you ate?
- What were you going to do next?
- ... and so on,

Now, I bet if you wrote all this down, you could have filled several pages. And no one told you to remember all this, yet you did. Your memory is all right, isn't it? Perhaps the way you use it can be polished up. We'll see what we can do soon. But what am I getting at, in this Section, by the word 'efficient'? See what you think.

SAQ 5

Rate each of the following options in terms which you think are good indicators of studying really efficiently.				
Option	Always a good indicator	Often a good indicator	Sometimes a good indicator	Seldom a good indicator
Knowing that I'm spending plenty of time studying.				
Having made lots of notes as I studied the topic.				
Having the feeling that I know the				

subject well after I've studied it for a while.				
Having tested myself out by doing plenty of practice at answering questions on each subject as I study it.				
Continuing to check out that I can achieve the intended learning outcomes associated with each element of studying.				

KEEPING YOURSELF ACTIVE

The thing to avoid is wasting time in being 'passive' when studying. There are several things you can do to keep active. To be active you've got to keep getting yourself into 'decision-making' mode – when making decisions you can't really remain passive. Let's explore some ways of doing this.

Becoming able to answer questions

Your learning materials probably contain lots of questions for you to try yourself out on. They may be called 'Self Assessment Questions' or 'SAQs'. (Notice that mine in this guide are concerned with self *analysis*, in other words questions that give you a chance of exploring your own study habits and attitudes; they are still, of course, self-assessment questions at the same time).

Where your materials contain SAQs, or whatever your material designers choose to call them, there should be *responses* for you to look at after doing the question, so you can see how you did. If you're learning online, you may get responses right there on your computer screen every time you have a go at answering a question – for example when you select an option from a multiple-choice question. Such responses may help you to spot common mistakes and give you ideas about avoiding them.

Now, every time you meet an SAQ, you have several choices. These include:

Doing exactly what the question asks you to, then looking at the answer or response given in the materials, and *deciding* how well you did what the question asked you to do.
Thinking how you would answer the question (without actually *doing* it) then turning to the response to see if your thoughts had been on the right lines.
 Skipping the question and reading on (this is tempting, especially if you're dying to find out what's coming next).

Now look back at those three choices (and there are more I've not mentioned) and look for the only good choice. Yes, it's the first one. It takes a bit of discipline but it's worth it. Choice number 2 really isn't as good because you won't *remember* what you were thinking (be it right or wrong) for very long after you've looked at the response. For example, you may have been thinking wrongly and as soon as you see the response you say to yourself 'of course, now I see'. But you'll not remember the wrong thinking to avoid in future for nearly as long as if you'd committed yourself and checked your own answer against the response given in the materials. Choice number 3 is all too easy but if you make that choice, you're deciding to be passive rather than active. You'd miss out on all the practice the designers of the learning materials carefully built in for you.

“But if I *know* that my answer is right, why bother writing it down or checking with the response?” you may be asking. It’s still worth the short time it would take to put down your answer in writing, it’s useful practice. You may know something in an exam, but you’ve still got to express it on paper before you get any credit for it.

To sum up on SAQs and suchlike, it’s worth treating them seriously and not depriving yourself of the practice they give you. Also, it’s worth using them as periodic revision tests, to see if any of the things you could do have ‘slipped’. It’s very useful indeed to discover just which bits are prone to slip because then (and only then) you can do something about them and you can practice with them. You can’t put right something you’ve forgotten until you find out that you have indeed forgotten it!

Build your own question bank

Imagine you had a collection of all the questions that you could possibly have to answer to prove that you knew a topic. Imagine next that you’d practised with this collection till you could answer the lot! Well you’d know the topic of course. And you’d know that you knew the topic. What’s more, you’d be able to prove to anyone (yourself, an examiner, anyone at all) that you knew it. Let’s call this collection of questions a *question bank*. Any exam question (past or future) would be contained in the collection. That doesn’t mean the question bank is a huge collection of exam questions. It’s a collection of all the little questions that make up such bigger questions. It’s all the things you need to become able to *do, make, draw, describe, explain....* All those active words again.

The questions in your question bank should be short and direct. It only takes seconds to write one. How do you decide what questions to write? You’ll soon develop the skill if you do as follows. Think for a minute about the following question (recite it a few times if you like).

“What am I expected to become able to do?”

This is the most important question to have in your mind all the time you’re studying. But rather than write down answers to this question, write *short, sharp questions* for yourself to practice on. Suppose you’ve been studying a couple of pages of learning material. Ask yourself that question – What am I expected to become able to do? – about the material, and turn your replies into a set of short questions. It could look something like this – I’m using nonsense words to give you the flavour of what you can do with the real words from your subject area.

- What’s a centribagel?
- Define the word ‘flobbered’.
- Describe a Venetian Twist.
- List 5 features of a left-handed tabulator.
- State Oakwood’s Law
- How many sheets of paper make a Treatise?
- Why does fermantosis happen?
- When does mesopraxis happen?
- How does a perfocular work?

The variety of these little questions is endless. But, if you can answer them all, you know the topic – and you know you know it. You can show you know it, by answering the questions. You can prove that you know it. This is not just a nice feeling – it’s a *deserved* good feeling.

Matching your question bank to the intended learning outcomes

Let's go back again to the big question (*what am I expected to become able to do?*) and look more closely at just one word in it, the word *expected*. That's important. You could, of course, write yourself little questions on things no one expected you to become able to do. There's no point doing that. So when you can tell that there's no need for you to do something, you don't include the question on that something in your question bank. This could happen when your learning materials are just setting the scene, giving background information, or going into details that no one would need to remember word-for-word or number-for-number, and so on.

But help is usually at hand. Most open learning programmes have statements of 'intended learning outcomes'. It's worth searching for these – and asking for them if you can't find them. The intended learning outcomes should give you really useful clues as to what's worth addressing in your question bank, and what to leave out.

And make good use of any other clues to what you really need to become able to do. Such clues come from the questions in tutor-marked assignments, past exam questions, worked solutions in your learning materials, and anything else which alerts you to what's sooner or later likely to be expected of you.

Staying in decision-making mode

When you're studying really efficiently, everything is geared to the three main decisions you're making:

1. Is this little bit of material important enough to write a question bank entry about? If so:
2. *What am I expected to become able to do with it?* Then:
3. How best can I turn what I am expected to become able to do into questions for me to practise on?

'All this decision making!' you may be saying. But they're actually quite easy decisions in practice and they keep you active. What's even more important is that you get something to show for your efforts. That list of questions you build up as you study is a *learning tool*. It's something you can practice with. It's something you can use to measure how well you're doing. And you can use it whenever you choose. It's particularly useful to use such learning tools when you're doing purposeful revision – preparing for a test or an exam.

Your question bank can be portable. It can be one of those 'somethings' I mentioned in the last section, which you can carry around with you. Suppose you write your sets of short questions on cards or in a pocket notebook. You can take a card (or a page) wherever you go. At any moment you can quickly look at each question in turn and decide whether you can still answer it. You can maybe tick it if you know you can answer it. So what do you gain? A lot. You can quickly think through a lot of things you can still do (a lot quicker than reading the original learning material sections).

But more important, you can find out which bits you can't do at the moment. You know now what will need a bit more practice or what needs looking up in more detail. And the question bank is intact, a tool ready for you to use again and again. You can continue to add to it every time you recognise something else you may be expected to become able to do.

Tools that aren't used go rusty. So make sure that you do use your question bank – it only takes minutes to go through a bit of it, checking. Whenever you work with it, whether adding to it as you study or practising with it, you can rest assured you'll automatically be learning actively because you'll be keeping yourself in decision-making mode. How much more efficient this sort of approach is compared to just passively reading.

More learning tools – summaries

We've spent quite some time on that first sort of learning tool, the question bank. But there's another kind of useful activity I'd like you to think about. I'll get straight to the point this time: it's *making summaries*. Suppose you spend 15 minutes making a summary of all the main points in a few pages of material. Once again, you are being active. Again you're making decisions all the time. You're judging what's important. You're judging what is mere background detail (and, of course, deliberately missing out unimportant things when you make your summary).

What uses can summaries have? They too are *learning tools*. They're something tangible to show for your efforts. They're compact and concise, so you can carry them around with you. You can use them to revise main points. You can spend the odd five minutes here and there refreshing your grasp of something by thinking through your summary. You can use your summary to help you with those question bank questions that have slipped. If you're an online learner, you can carry your summaries around with you and practise with them when you're offline – anywhere at all, not just near a computer.

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Intended learning outcomes of Section 5: How that we've explored some aspect of making your studying really efficient, how well do you feel you can ...	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can't quite do this yet!
1. Accept and believe that working efficiently is far more important than simply spending a lot of hours studying. It may mean you can get a lot more done in a much shorter number of hours.			
2. Recognise that efficiency is best measured by how well you become able to answer questions.			
3. Improve your efficiency and speed by building into your study strategy plenty of practice at answering questions, including self-assessment questions (or whatever they're called) in your own learning materials.			
4. Make good use of the intended learning outcomes of your learning materials, to help you to focus upon what's really important.			
5. Make your own question bank as a learning tool to provide you with the means to find out at any time how your studying is progressing.			
6. Make summaries as you study, to give you a further learning tool to help you consolidate what you're learning.			

ACTIVITY 5

This activity is intended to give you the chance to find out how useful it is to use the question bank ideas discussed in this Section.

1. Choose a few pages of material you want to get to grips with. If you've not yet started your open learning course, choose something relevant which you've learned in the past, or something new which relates to what you're going to study soon.
2. Work through your chosen material, writing short, sharp questions whenever you feel you may be expected to remember or do something. Try to write between 10 and 20 questions.
3. After a week or so, look at your questions without looking at the original materials. Tick the questions you're sure you can still answer correctly, and put crosses beside the ones you know you can't yet answer correctly (and maybe an asterisk beside those you're not sure whether you can still answer or not). Then look up the answers again for the ones which you can't yet do.
4. After another week or so, see how many of the 'crossed' questions on your list you can still answer correctly. If there are some you can't, look up the answers once more and this time design some 'clues' which you can jot down beside the questions.
5. Continue going back to your list of questions every now and then, until you can answer them all every time you try it.
6. Don't worry at all if certain questions prove particularly elusive. It's of great value simply to find out which these questions are. Then you're well on your way towards cracking the problem. You know where to practise that bit more.

Section 6

HOW TO MAKE BEST USE OF YOUR TUTOR

(A tutor, if you've got one, is there to help you. Tutors can only help you if you let them!)

Not all open learning schemes use tutors. If you're doing your open learning without any such support, skip this section (unless of course you want to find out what you may be missing out on). Where open learning is backed up by tutor support, the roles of tutors vary a lot from one programme to another. Some schemes use 'distant' tutors, where learners send to tutors (by post or by email) their work from time to time. Sometimes there are fixed times. Sometimes the timetable for assessed work is negotiated. In such schemes, learners may never actually meet their tutors, yet they can still get to know each other surprisingly well through emails, letters, and sometimes telephone chats.

Other open learning courses combine distant and face-to-face tutoring. If part of your course is college-based or in a training centre, you may meet tutors now and then. Some open learning courses have regular face-to-face sessions.

There's no fixed job description for open learning tutors – their roles vary a lot from course to course. There are excellent ones – and there are bad ones!

SAQ 6

How might you feel about your tutor? Imagine yourself in the following position:

- You've got a 'distant' tutor – let's say you've not met this person, and possibly never will, but they're going to mark your work each time you send a completed assignment to them, as part of your open learning course.
- You've just finished your very *first* assignment, and it is sealed in an envelope ready for posting to your tutor (or you've just attached the assignment to an email you're about to send off to this person).

Use the table below to map out which of the following feelings could be your feelings at this particular moment in time.

How you might be feeling at this point in time?	This is me!	I think I might feel something like this.	This is <i>not</i> how I expect I'd feel.
1. I'm glad that assignment is finished at last!			
2. I'm apprehensive – a bit scared.			
3. I'm excited – I want to know how I've done.			
4. I'm worried about what this tutor might say to me.			
5. I'm afraid of showing myself up.			
6. Is my work going to be tidy enough?			
7. I hope my spelling is OK, and my punctuation, and so on.			
8. I feel exposed and vulnerable.			
9. Will this tutor think that my work is good enough?			
10. Will this tutor give me lots of critical feedback, and will this upset me?			
11. How quickly will I hear from this tutor?			

12. Will I get all defensive if my work is criticised?			
13. I'm looking forward to being told how good my work is			
14. Other feelings and questions: write your own below:			

GETTING THAT FIRST ASSIGNMENT OFF!

As you may have guessed from the various feelings we explored in SAQ 6, that first assignment can be 'make or break' time for many open learners. Lots of people hesitate to send in that first assignment – for days – for weeks! It takes courage to pop it into the post-box, or even to press 'send' on the computer. Once it's sent, it's sent!

The fact remains, that tutors can't help you with any problems you might have until they've got the assignment and can see what these problems actually are. Your assignment may be way ahead of the standards expected, or way behind them. Or it might be just about right. The only way you're going to find out which is to send it in and get feedback from that tutor. Preferably, don't wait and wait until you think it's absolutely perfect. However good it is, there will always turn out to be at least some things you could have done to make it better. The fastest way to sort it all out is to send it in, and give your tutor the chance to help you to find out how good it already is, and what you can do to make your *next* assignment better.

BUT WHAT IF I'M REALLY STRUGGLING?

Most open learning programmes have some sort of 'help!' mechanism. There could be a telephone hotline, where for at least some advertised parts of the week there's a real person at the end of a phone line to talk your problems over with you. Or there may be email helplines. This means you can put your problem into words when you're ready to do so, and send it off, and expect a fairly quick response from someone at the other end. Sometimes you may be pleasantly surprised to get an email reply from a tutor miles away within minutes.

On computer-based courses, there are often FAQs – Frequently Asked Questions – available online, along with helpful responses to all these questions. There's every chance that your own particular problem turns out to be a Frequently Asked Question – which can make you feel a lot better about having it as a problem yourself – you're not alone!

You might even have the telephone number of your own tutor, but feel scared to ring up this person you don't yet know. Even a tutor who's just sat down to dinner is unlikely to say 'How dare you disturb me now, aren't I allowed to eat', and far more likely to say 'Sorry, I'm tied up for the moment, but I'll give you a ring back in an hour or so'. And of course with email enquiries, your tutor will get it when suitable at that end, so it doesn't matter when you send your message.

Don't forget that open learners don't have to be hermits. In most open learning schemes, there are contact channels between learners themselves. These may include email links, computer conferences, and lists of phone numbers. If you're struggling, and you know how to contact some other learners on your course, this could be an ideal way to move things forward. There is every probability that if *you* are struggling, so are other people – this can be a source of comfort. Or someone else may have found a way forward. In face-to-face college-based courses, learners derive a great deal of support from each other, quite informally. Naturally, some care

has to be taken that such support doesn't extend to plagiarism or cheating, but it's just a matter of common sense to work out where the appropriate boundaries lie.

YOUR ATTITUDES TO YOUR TUTOR'S COMMENTS

Let's imagine you've now got that first assignment back from your tutor. With racing pulse, you pick it from the doormat (if it came by post), or open the email containing the attachment with feedback from your tutor. Your first impulse will be to look for your score or grade, if it's an assignment that has been quantitatively assessed. If the score or grade is good, you'll feel wonderful! There's no harm in that of course. But if the score or grade is not-so-good, you could feel hurt, insulted, let down, discouraged, and perhaps like giving up open learning forever! Some open learners *do* give up at this point – don't be one of them! Please read what's in the next little box three times!

The least important thing about your assignment is its grade or score!

What is much more important is the feedback you can get by looking at your tutor's comments, explanations, and reactions. Use the feedback to find out exactly what went wrong when errors happened in your work. Learn from your mistakes – it's one of the best ways to learn for all of us. Look for the things which you did perfectly well enough, and learn from these too. Build on your strengths, and identify your weaknesses so that you can work on these next time round.

It is of course hard to take criticism, especially when you've already tried your hardest. A good tutor tries hard too, however, and criticism where needed is likely to be of the constructive kind. Good tutors try to give you ideas you can build on in your future work. So don't be defensive; keep your mind open and willing to learn from feedback.

HELP YOUR TUTOR TO HELP YOU

How best can you do this? There are all sorts of possibilities, depending on the context of your open learning programme.

For example, you may already have deadlines by which respective assignments are due. But if you haven't such deadlines, it can be helpful to ask your tutor for a suggested deadline for your next assignment, or a suggested timescale by which you should aim to reach the end of Module 5, and so on. Most tutors are only too pleased to help their learners to structure the time-management of their learning.

It can help to start some dialogue with your tutor. For example, in a covering letter along with your assignment, you could include your own impressions of your work to date, for example with sentences along the following lines:

"I reckon I'm doing OK at such-and-such – what do you think please?"

"I feel I'm struggling a bit with so-and-so, have you any suggestion for me about this please?"

"Which parts in particular would you suggest I spend some extra time upon?"

"What I'd really like some help on at this point in time is so-and-so".

"The point I just can't get my head round at present is such-and-so. Can you suggest what I can do about this please?"

Most open learning tutors are only too pleased to respond to learners who are clearly trying to get their act together.

LET OTHER PEOPLE HELP YOU TOO

What if you don't have a tutor? Or what if, with the best will in the world, you just don't hit it off with your tutor? Other human beings can help too! For example, you can agree a deadline with

anyone. You can negotiate with a friend or colleague your intended deadline for reaching the end of Module 5. Just the fact you've agreed this with someone gives you an incentive. You want to be able to say to this person "Yes, I'm on schedule, I've reached the end of Module 5". Better still, get the person concerned to do the asking "You said you'd finish this by next week, are you going to make it?"

It can also be really useful to get other people to read things that you're writing. They don't have to be experts in the subject you're writing about, to give you some useful feedback and reactions. They may be able to help you with your spelling, grammar, copy-editing and so on, without knowing anything about the topic. Simply having another pair of eyes looking at one's work always gives some extra useful feedback. "What do you think of this, honestly?" is a good starter question. Better still of course, ask several different people.

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Intended learning outcomes of Section 6: Now that we've explored how best to make use of your tutor, how well do you feel you can do each of the following?	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can't quite do this yet!
1. Be prepared for the mixture of feelings you will have at the point of sending in your first tutor-marked assignment.			
2. Regard your tutor as a helper rather than just as an assessor.			
3. Help your tutor to help you to get to grips with those parts of your studies you haven't yet got your head around properly.			
4. Use your tutor to keep you at it – to keep you on schedule and on task with your open learning.			
5. Make the most of feedback from your tutor – whether it is praise or constructive criticism.			
6. Use other people to help you to keep on track with your open learning – friends, colleagues, fellow-learners – anyone!			

ACTIVITY 6

Make yourself a 'Learner Profile' – a single page which sums you up as an individual who happens to be doing some open learning. It could be useful to send such a profile to a tutor, to help the two of you to tune in to exactly what sort of person you are.

Factual Details

My full name:

Preferred first name:

Contact address:

Work address (if different)

Preferred phone number:

Email address (if available):

What I'm studying at present:

What I've already studied:

Why I'm studying at present:

What I plan to go on to study next:

Approximate number of hours I have available for studying each week on average:

What sorts of help I may particularly appreciate:

Things I think I'm already good at:

Other useful information about me: I think you should also know that...

Signature:

Date:

Section 7

PAINLESS REVISION!

(It's all in the mind?)

It used to be called 'swotting' when I was at school. Most people don't like the thought of it very much. It's usually called 'revision' which is rather strange really, as there's a lot more to *good* revision than just 'looking again' at things. In fact, think about it. No matter how many times we 'look again' at something, there's no proof that we automatically become able to do it ourselves.

Have you done *bad* revision before? Can you remember sitting for hours at your desk or table, turning the pages every few minutes. But if I'd come up to you and asked you 'Right now. Tell me all about the topic you were doing five pages ago half-an-hour ago please'. You may well have forgotten all about it. In fact, you may have been sitting there wasting your time. You'd probably still remember the *first* few things you learned just after you sat down in the first place. And you probably would still remember the *last* think you read just before I interrupted you, but what about all that was in between? Down the drain, most likely.

For reasons like this, 'revision' gives a bad feeling in many people's brains. It's associated with long, boring times spent trying to cram information into the memory. It conjures up images of deprivation. Lack of human company. Lack of all the things you'd rather have been doing.

So let's get away from these ideas of revision. Let's think ahead. What can you do when you've revised successfully? In short, you can *do* it. You can give it back. You can explain it to people. You can write it down and explain it in words. You can apply it. You can solve problems with it. And above all, you can answer questions which get you to do it, give it back, explain it, apply it, and solve problems with it.

In short, *real* revision is about practice. Practice makes perfect. If you've *done* something ten times, you'll easily be able to do it just once more – in an exam, for example. But it's not just about reading. If you've read it ten times, you may still not be able to *write* it. So let's leave behind the image of sitting there just turning the pages – that's just cruelty to brains, and it doesn't work very well anyway.

But first, let's look at how you tackle revision, and talk you out of any bad habits you may presently have. Try SAQ 7 now. But don't just *read* it, *do* it. Don't cheat either – don't read my responses to the options you might choose in SAQ 7 till you've chosen them. Here goes!

SAQ 7

Rate yourself on each of the following statements about 'revision' – be honest, then (and only then) look at my responses to each of the statements below.

Statements about revision	This is very like me!	This is sometimes like me.	This is not at all like me!
1. I always leave revision till the last minute – and then wish I'd started it much, much earlier!			
2. I sit there trying to work for hours and hours, and often feel that my poor old brain just isn't taking anything in.			
3. I practise systematically all the way through my studies and enjoy the feeling of always being on top of my work.			

4. I don't do any real 'swotting', I just rely on having been conscientious all the way through my course.			
5. I find all sorts of reasons to put off the evil moment of actually starting any revision!			
6. I revise in a cool, calm, organised and systematic way as exams approach.			
7. I base my revision strategy on practising, so that by the time I need to, I've practised everything important until I can do things, quickly and efficiently, without any problems.			

SO HOW CAN REVISION BE MADE PAINLESS?

Well, let's be honest, it can't be made *effortless*. But it can indeed be made a lot less boring, a lot less tedious, and therefore less painful. It's actually the boredom and tedium which hurts, more than the effort.

Think back to those learning tools we explored in Section 5 – your question bank, and summaries in particular. Good quality revision is very much about putting these tools to work, sharpening them up, and practising with them.

When you're preparing for an exam, what you're really preparing for is to become able to do things on command. If it's a written exam, you're preparing to be able to answer questions in writing, perhaps also drawing things, interpreting them, calculating them, and so on. If it's a practical test, you're preparing to demonstrate your skills in a physical way, doing things. If you're preparing for an interview or oral exam (sometimes called a 'viva'), you're preparing to be able to speak in answer to questions, on demand.

In short, revision of any kind is all about becoming better able to *do* things. It's all about practice.

Practice and speed are closely connected. Also practice and repetition are closely connected. If we do something several times we're much more certain to be able to do it yet again when required, for example on command in an exam. And if we repeat it several times we get faster at doing it, so it takes us less time to do it once more in that exam. So we have much of the pressure taken away from us in the exam, and have time to devote to reading the questions really well, and to expressing our answers really well too.

Suppose you're sitting in an exam room, and you see a question where you *know* the answer – good news of course. But even if you know the answer, if you hadn't actually practised writing down your answer to the question already, it could take you quite a while to do so now. If however you'd already practised writing down the answers to several similar questions, you could then answer that exam question both well and quickly.

REVISION IS ABOUT TIME-MANAGEMENT

Let's think about an example. Suppose you're going to devote an hour of revision time to learn a particular bit of subject material. Let's explore two ways in which you could use 60 minutes to attempt to get your head round this subject.

Way 1

Spend the whole hour going through the topic thoroughly, and trying to get it to stay in your head, so that you could answer questions on it very well by the end of the hour.

Way 2

Day 1: Spend 10 minutes reading through the material, then 15 minutes looking at it more carefully, this time jotting down lots of short sharp questions, which would help you to test out that you had mastered this bit of material. Then stop.

Day 5: Spend 5 minutes with your list of questions from Day 1, finding out which of these you can still answer, but more importantly, identifying those which you can't now answer. Now spend 10 minutes with the original material, making a post-card size summary of the points which had slipped.

Day 11: Spend 10 minutes with your list of questions. This time, *think* through the answers to those questions which you *know* you can answer, but jot down skeleton answers to the questions which had 'slipped' on Day 5, using your summary from Day 5 as a last resort if you need it.

Day 15: Same as Day 11, but all in just 5 minutes this time, as less will have slipped by now.

Day 24: Another 5-minute check through your list of questions, with the odd minute used to polish up anything that is still managing to slip (but not very likely at all now).

If you've been doing the sums, you'll notice both Way 1 and Way 2 take a total of 60 minutes. What I've described in Way 2 is of course highly contrived, but deliberately so, for the sake of argument. Ask yourself now "Which way would be best if there was a spot test on the topic on Day 35?". I think you'll agree that Way 2 would be far to be preferred. If the spot test was on Day 2, Way 1 would have worked well enough, except that you probably would have a much better grip on the harder bits in the long run using Way 2.

WHO CAN HELP YOU WITH YOUR REVISION?

The old-fashioned sort of revision tended to be quite private. Can you remember doing it all on your own? Perhaps you didn't want other people even to know that you were doing it at all – not cool to be seen to be too studious perhaps? Remember the loneliness of the long-period reviser? Need not happen ever again!

For a start, you will by now have realised that I'm suggesting that revision is best done in short spells and often, rather than long spells only occasionally. But what about the loneliness? Loneliness is usually about missing the company of fellow human beings. Which fellow human beings? The people who might have been with you if you weren't busy revising? But think again. Surely it is possible to have the company of some of these people, and to get them to *help* you in your task of revising? Even just one person is infinitely better than no-one.

What sorts of people can help? Basically, any combination of the following three categories of people can help you with your revision.

1. Other people who are learning the same subject, for the same reason as you are.
2. Anyone else who isn't learning the same subject, and perhaps knows nothing at all about it.
3. Any other human being who speaks the same language as you, and who isn't in '1' or '2' above.

This gives you a lot of choice!

What can such people do to help you with your revision? Whether or not they're learning the same subject themselves, they can:

- Ask you your questions.
- Tell from your body language when you're answering confidently, and when you're waffling because you don't yet really know the answer.
- Listen to your answers, and ask you to explain things to them.
- Ask you *again* the questions you got wrong half-an-hour ago.

Give them half a chance, and such people can start to become even more active in *your* revision.

"Isn't it about time you gave me another of those lists of questions to quiz you with?"

"Remember that question which beat you yesterday? Can you answer it today? Go on then".

So a lot of the loneliness has now been taken out of your revision. And your grip on the subject is being polished day by day. Later, you could find yourself in the exam room, confronted by a particular question, and thinking to yourself "Ah yes, that's the one Jane kept bothering me with for days, but I know it now", and proceeding confidently with your answer, remembering how you'd practised explaining it to Jane.

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF REVISION

From what we've explored so far, you'll know that it's more fun to work in short bursts, and to keep working actively. However, if you're doing a lot of learning, there could still be times when you've got so much revision to tackle that you're still going to need to spend quite substantial parts of most days on it.

The following tips can help you.

Keep ringing the changes. Don't spend longer than one 'revision slot' on any particular topic.

Go on to something quite different, then come back to your first topic later the same day. A change is almost as good as a rest.

Don't sit at it for longer than an hour at a time. Active revision is actually hard work – because you're practising answering questions, not just reading things. Take a break. Even 15 minutes walking around is a good break. A meal is a better break.

Plan in some time off. Don't just escape when you can't take any more revision. If you just 'escape' you could still have a guilty conscience! Make a reasonable amount of time off part of your plans, and enjoy this time off. Regard it as legitimate. Rationalise that it's time for you to recharge your batteries.

Don't struggle for too long at any one thing. Spend a reasonable amount of time with something that's proving difficult, then leave it, and return to revising something that's much more straightforward. Come back to the difficult thing a bit later, or next day. The chances are it will seem less difficult then, as your subconscious mind will still have been gnawing away at it, even when you were concentrating on something much easier.

Be a magpie, not a gannet! Gannets can eat large quantities of fish, all at once. Magpies tend to pick up something here, something there. So deliberately learn a bit of this, then a bit of that, rather than a boring huge amount of just one thing.

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Intended learning outcomes of Section 7: Now that we've explored revision tactics, how well do you feel you can do each of the following?	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can't quite do this yet!
1. Take positive action to ensure that revision is no longer going to be something that you will just start to do towards the end of your course?			
2. Abandon any excuses for not starting on systematic revision?			
3. Make sure that your revision is an active process, based on practising to become able to do things with what you're learning?			
4. Put your learning tools – especially question-banks and summaries – to work in your revision?			
5. Use other people to help you to make your revision more enjoyable, and more productive?			
6. Build your revision strategy around variety, breaks-and-changes, and planned time off?			

ACTIVITY 7

Make yourself a Revision Planning Poster, with two lists as follows:

<p>Three things I used to do when I was revising, that I'm never going to do again:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • <p>Three things I am going to do in my revision, which I haven't done before:</p>

When you've made your poster, stick it up where other people you know will see it – friends, family, whoever. Ask them to help you to keep you your intentions, and to stop you from deviating from your plan. Also ask them for any suggestions which are even better than your first thoughts under each heading, and improve your list with their ideas.

Section 8**HOW TO WIN THE EXAM GAME**

(Or do you prefer having a few teeth filled?)

ARE YOU HEADING TOWARDS EXAMS?

This final section is about exams. I'm calling them exams, but you can use the suggestions in this section to help you to approach any kind of test. Even if your open learning programme doesn't have any exams, you're bound to meet some kind of test sometime in the future, so I hope my advice in this section will be useful to you one day. If you do however have one or more exams coming up, this section may be really important to you.

Many people hate exams! Not too many people really enjoy every minute of them. Most folk link exams to feelings of anxiety or tension. It would be much happier if we could all link exams to feelings of confidence, and delight at the chance they give you of being able to prove how well your learning has gone. Whatever else, I hope this section will help you to feel better about exams, and better able to do yourself justice in them.

Possibly you've got a choice. Perhaps it's entirely up to you whether you take an exam at the end of your open learning studies. Perhaps you've not yet decided about this. Possibly it seems miles away at the present moment in time. It is always useful, however, to tune your mind in to how best to go about doing an exam, especially when it's still a long way off. That way, you may find you can approach it in a much more relaxed way than you've ever done before, and find out more about how the exam game works, so that you become more skilled in playing the game, and consequentially do better at the game.

If you are indeed heading towards one or more exams, it's best not to pretend that they don't exist. If you hide from oncoming exams, they suddenly become a lot more frightening as they approach.

Use SAQ 8 to exorcise some of your feelings about exams now.

SAQ 8

How do you feel about exams? Tick whichever column is most like you below, then look in particular at my responses to the options which you rated as 'very like me!'.			
Feelings about exams	This is very like me!	This is sometimes like me.	This isn't at all like me!
1. I'm scared stiff of exams! They terrify me! It's not a game I like at all.			
2. I don't seem to do as well in exams as I know I could have done – there must be something wrong with my exam technique.			
3. Exams don't bother me – in fact I quite enjoy them. I quite like the exam game.			
4. I don't think exams are fair – they're not a good way of measuring how well people have learned things.			
5. I'm lucky! I usually do better in exams than I actually deserve to do. I must just be good at playing the exam game.			

6. I've had some bad times in exams in the past, and am worried that I'll re-live some of the nightmares yet again next time I have an exam.			
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HAVE YOU EVER FAILED AN EXAM?

I don't like the 'F' word! Let's put the question a better way: "have you ever managed not to pass an exam?" Most people have succeeded not to pass an exam at one time or another. That includes most really brilliant people most really famous people, and most perfectly normal people.

Let's put it into perspective. If you've ever 'failed' an exam, it boils down to this:

- what you did,
- on that particular day,
- with the particular questions on the paper that day,
- that happened to be written by particular examiners for that occasion,
- in whatever mood you happened to be in,
- in whatever health you were in that day,
- didn't match up to what was being looked for,
- by the particular people marking your paper,
- on that particular occasion,
- in whatever mood they were in on the day they marked it!

There are a lot of variables in the box above! Exam technique is about maximising your chances with all of these variables in mind.

EXAMINERS ARE HUMAN!

Believe it or not, examiners eat, breathe, and sleep. More importantly, they *like* giving you marks. It makes them pleased when they can give you marks. They are just looking for the chance to give you marks. The easier you make it for them to find the mark-earning points in your answers to the exam questions, the happier they become, and the more marks you get.

It is possible, however, to put examiners into a bad mood. If your answers go on and on about irrelevant things, this annoys them. They've still got to read it all, but they get fed up. And if you've been writing so fast that your writing is illegible, that annoys them too. It's harder work for them. So it's a good idea, if your writing is as bad as mine, to say a little less in your answers, but make it that bit more readable.

In many subjects, examiners *like* diagrams. They like to see something visual, such as sketches, graphs, drawings, pie-charts, histograms, anything in fact which gives them a change from just reading candidates' writing. They *particularly* like to see well-labelled visuals, which tell their own story. A well-labelled diagram can often tell them at once that you know what you're doing in your answer to a question. As soon as they know that you know what you're writing about, they'll give you the marks for it, and a nice diagram can be the quickest way of you getting them to do this.

TIMING IS THE NAME OF THE GAME

In this section, let's take a calm, cool, calculated look at how best to go about doing yourself justice in your next exam. We'll look in turn at the following stages:

- before your exam

- the first ten minutes or so of your exam
- the main part of your exam
- the closing minutes towards the end of your exam
- after your exam.

Doing the most appropriate things, in each of these stages, paves your way to getting more marks. And managing your time in these stages helps you to get these marks in a logical, efficient and purposeful way. Let's get straight on with the first stage – immediately before the exam starts.

BEFORE YOUR EXAM

Doing the right things in the 24 hours leading up to an exam can affect how you feel during the exam itself, and this in turn can increase the number of marks you can win. In particular, it's useful to avoid doing various pointless things in the 24 hours before any exam – don't waste your physical or mental energy on such things.

Things to avoid doing include:

- tiring yourself out trying to revise absolutely everything one more time;
- scrabbling around looking for pens, pencils, calculator, and so on;
- last-minute searching for the actual location of the exam;
- rushing to get there on time because you set out too late;
- getting demoralised in that tense little cluster of candidates waiting to go in to the exam room.

In particular, don't do too much revision at this late stage. You need to save your energy for the exam itself, so you can do yourself justice when you answer the questions. It's much more sensible just to do a little extra polishing. Remind yourself of the most important things you will need to remember. Have a little extra practice using your learning tools. Look again at the summaries you've been using during your revision. Practice a little more with your question bank – but concentrating now on the questions you *can* answer, rather than trying to sort out any remaining ones which are still proving difficult.

Avoid that cluster of candidates waiting to go in to the exam. Human nature being what it is, they tend to work themselves into a downward spiral. They're all asking each other whether they've learned this and that, and even five minutes in that cluster can make you feel that everyone else knows everything and you know nothing.

THE FIRST TEN MINUTES OR SO

These are very special minutes. They can be 'make or break' minutes too. You're naturally a bit tense as you prepare to see at last exactly what's in store for you in the exam. However, this is the time that you need to be cool, calm and collected, so that you can make some important decisions. The main things to check out during these early minutes of any exam are as follows:

- How many questions have I to do?
- Do all the questions carry equal marks or not?
- How many minutes approximately does this give me for each of the questions?
- Which questions shall I do (if there's a choice, of course);
- Which question shall I do *first*?

The only way to make these decisions sensibly is to read the questions slowly, calmly, and more than once. It's then worth making an approximate timetable, so that you know how long you should aim to spend on each question. But leave yourself say 20 minutes to spend at the end of the exam *improving* your answers. I'll say more about exactly what to do in these 20 minutes later, but for now accept that it's really useful to plan in these 20 minutes.

If you've got a choice of questions, it can be really important to make the best possible choice for you. The only way of doing this is to read the questions one at a time, really carefully, and making decisions as you go. It can be useful to jot ticks and crosses beside the questions on the question paper, to record your decisions, for example as follows:

- × not a good question for me – I'll try and avoid this one if I can.
- √ this could be one of my questions – I know I can get at least some of the marks for this one.
- √√ Definitely a good question for me – I feel I can get most of the marks for this one.

Lots of exam candidates will tell you sad tales of how they missed out on choosing questions they could have done perfectly well, because they didn't spend enough time making these decisions at the start of their exams.

Make sure you read *all* of the questions. Don't be the unlucky candidate who forgets entirely to turn over the question sheet, and doesn't see that there are more questions on the other side! These may include your best ones.

Once you've worked out which questions will be the best ones for you, it's usually a good idea to start with one of your √√ ones.

THE MAIN PART OF YOUR EXAM

Suppose you've now started with one of your √√ questions. The main danger is that you'll spend too long on this question, because you know a lot about it. This is a serious danger, because if you over-run, you may not have any time left at all for your *last* question later. It's really important to attempt *all* your questions equally. If it's the sort of paper where you've got to answer all the questions anyway, it's just a matter of getting on and doing them all.

Case study

Suppose you've got to answer 5 questions, and all questions carry equal marks (20 marks each), and the pass mark is 40%.

- If you answer all 5 questions, you only need to score on average 8 marks out of 20 for each question to pass the exam. This should be easy enough.
- If you only answer 4 questions, you still only need to score on average 10 marks out of 20 for each of the questions you answer. That's not much harder. But if one of your 4 questions runs into problems and you score 0 marks for that one, you then have to score 13 marks for each of the other three – that is harder.
- If you only answer 3 questions, you've got to score over 13 marks for each to pass the exam, and if one of your 3 does down the chute, you'd have to score 20 marks for each of the other two questions just to pass – and this is very unlikely to happen!

Show your working out

If you're doing calculations, for example, don't just write down the final answer, especially if you're in an exam where calculators are allowed. Show the examiner how you got to your final answers. If you've got the *correct* final answer, it may not be critical to show the examiner how you got to it. But suppose you *didn't* get the right final answer. You could get 0 marks for that part of the question. But if you got the wrong final answer, and the examiner can see *why* you went wrong, you will often get at least some marks for anything you did right on your way to your answer. If it was only a little mistake you made, you could get 19 out of 20 marks even

though your final answer wasn't right. That's a big difference from the 0 marks you would get if the examiner couldn't see where you made your little mistake.

When using a calculator, and substituting numbers into a formula or equation, it's really important to write down the numbers on your paper, so that the examiner can see exactly which number you put where in the formula. This means that if you make a mistake in your calculation, the examiner can still see that you were trying to do the correct thing with the formula, and will give you marks for this.

What if my mind goes blank on me?

This is scary. Most people have had this happen to them in an exam, sometime or other, including me! But it need never happen again to you. In fact, it doesn't just happen, people *cause* it to happen. It usually happens as follows. You're struggling to remember something, but it just won't come to the surface of your memory. So you try harder to remember it – and it goes deeper down into your memory and refuses to come to the surface. So you try harder still, and your mind goes blank in protest! This causes panic feelings, not surprisingly. It's because you've been cruel to your brain – brains don't work if put under this sort of pressure.

So what should you do if you feel a hint of panic coming on? Don't be cruel to your brain. Don't try to force your memory to give you anything. Slow down. Take a few slow deep breaths. Relax for a minute – this seems like a long time, but isn't. This is the time to stop doing that particular question, and move on to some other question – something where you know exactly what you're looking for, and won't be cruel to your brain. You're still scoring marks, but on a different question. More often than not, when you're safely, calmly busy doing this other question, the thing you were looking for in the first place pops naturally back into your memory, and you can then jot it down so that you won't lose it again, and in your own time go back to that earlier question and polish it off.

Stick to the questions

Each and every mark available in an exam is for the answers to the questions on the question paper. That's obvious? But it also means that anything that *isn't* directly part of an answer to a question scores exactly zero marks. Yet lots of candidates write all sorts of stuff down, that wasn't asked for in the questions. And they score no marks for this. More importantly, they've simply wasted their time and energy writing down things which scored no marks.

The best way to stick to the questions is to keep reading them. Re-read the question you're answering every two or three minutes, just to make sure you don't go wandering off into putting irrelevant stuff down in your answers.

Candidates who *don't* keep their eyes on the questions report a strange phenomenon. If you *don't* look at a question for 30 minutes, but busily keep on answering it, and only then look back at it, the question may have changed itself completely! This doesn't happen if you keep your eyes on the questions, however.

Don't be tempted, even once you've completely answered a question, to put down everything else you know about that particular topic. There won't be any extra marks for this, and in fact it could end up annoying the examiner, who has still got to read all these extra things which aren't part of what the question asked for.

THOSE VITAL MINUTES TOWARDS THE END OF YOUR EXAM

How many minutes? If it's a three-hour exam, save around 20 minutes for what comes next. Even if it's just a one-hour exam, still save around 10 minutes. Use these minutes as follows.

- **Stop answering questions!** Even if you've still not finished answering the question you were busy with, it's worth stopping now, and doing the following,
- **Read everything you've written since the start of the exam.** But don't *just* read it all. You'll find mistakes – put these right as you go along. Sometimes you'll find that what you

wrote wasn't what you meant. Change it now – you only get marks for what you wrote and none for what you meant if that was different! You'll find extra useful points which have come back into your mind since you wrote your answers – slip these points in as you go now. (If they're just in your mind, you won't get any marks for them – get them into your answers). Tidy up your answers as you go. Make sure that it's really clear where each question (and question-part) starts and finishes – make the examiner's job that bit easier.

You will be amazed how many extra marks you can pick up in these closing minutes, by following the advice above. What you're actually doing is *editing* your work. When you've *finished* doing this, and there aren't any more marks to be gained by improving your answers, then it's fine to go back to any question which still needs finishing off.

AFTER YOUR EXAM?

I'm not going to say much about this – except don't bother doing a post-mortem. As soon as your script is handed in, that particular exam is history. Nothing will change the result. Don't relive the whole exam in painful slow motion by going through it all again now. It won't cheer you up! You'll find things where you made mistakes! You'll think of things you could have put into your answers that you hadn't put in. If you've got another exam to prepare for, get on doing that. If you've no more exams to prepare for, just enjoy yourself for a while.

SO WHAT ARE THE TEN MAIN RULES OF THIS EXAM GAME?

They are as follows:

Timing is important.

Choose wisely which questions you will answer, if you've got a choice.

Answer the questions – don't just put down everything you know about the topic.

Keep your eyes on the questions in case they change!

Don't waste time and energy on anything that *isn't* answering the questions.

Plan time to edit and improve your answers towards the end of the exam.

You get marks for what you wrote, not for what you meant to write.

Remember that examiners are human – please them, don't annoy them!

Don't panic. Just get on and answer another question if you get stuck with the present question.

Show the examiners how you get to your answers.

CHECKLIST OF INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Intended learning outcomes of Section 8: Now that we've explored exam technique, how well do you feel you can do each of the following?	I can really do this now!	I can just about do this now.	I can't quite do this yet!
1. Prepare constructively for exams all the way through your studies, not just towards the end.			
2. Leave behind any bad feelings associated with exams because of things which went wrong in the past.			
3. Choose sensible things to do just before an exam.			

4. Spend the first few minutes of an exam really wisely, in particular making sure that you choose the best questions for you.			
5. Make sure that you answer the questions, and don't waste time and energy on anything that won't get you marks.			
6. Recognise that examiners are human, and do what you can to put them into a good mood when they mark your answers.			
7. Spend the closing minutes of any exam getting many extra marks by editing and improving your answers.			

ACTIVITY 8

This Activity is to give you the chance to see how exams work, from the examiners' perspective.

Select an old exam question, or assignment question, on a topic you already know well. Or if you prefer, make up a new question of your own on such a topic.

Write out a model answer to your chosen question. Don't do this under exam conditions, but make the answer as good as you can, using your notes and books. Leave a margin at the right-hand-side of each page.

Now suppose your answer to the question is a perfect one, and is worth the full 20 marks for the question. Take a red pen, and decide where the mark-scoring points are in your answer, and enter these marks as sub-totals in the right hand margin you left, making sure that they add up to the full 20 marks. What you're actually doing is making a marking scheme for your question, and marking your answer in the same way as an examiner does.

Show your question, model answer, and marking scheme to other people. If you've got a tutor or someone who knows about the subject, all the better. Ask whether people think you've missed anything out of your model answer. Ask whether people think you've allocated your 20 marks out sensibly for the things you included in your model answer.

OPEN LEARNING IS FOR LIFE

Learning never stops. Even when you're not studying something purposefully, you're still continuing to learn. One of the real benefits of open learning is that it helps you to become better at learning under your own steam. You develop the skills to keep going without other people pressing you to learn. You develop the skills to measure how your own learning is going. You become better at fitting learning into busy schedule of normal life. You get better at learning at your own pace – and adjusting your pace to fit what you need to learn. You become better at learning here, there and everywhere, rather than just at one particular desk or table. You get better at learning from learning resources – print-based, online, and so on.

It is now well recognised that people who have been successful open learners are simply better at learning. Being an open learner teaches you more about learning than simply being taught. All the suggestions in this book can continue to serve you well even when you're not deliberately studying something. And they can help you to help other people around you to become better at learning.

It is also well known that open learning seems to be addictive. People who have succeeded at open learning often choose to keep learning that way, and pick up all sorts of useful knowledge and skills as a result of this. This addiction is not least to do with the fact that open learning gives you a lot of control of the time, place, and pace of your learning, and it's pleasant to be in control.

Whatever else we do, we continue to be learners. Much of what we continue to learn happens under conditions which boil down to open learning. I wish you well, and hope that this little booklet has played a part in bringing out the best of the open learner that is you.

Some further reading

If you've found this little booklet useful, and if you're diving ever more deeply into studying (or helping other people to do so), you may be interested in some of the other things I've written for various kinds of learners – and their teachers.

How to study: practical tips for university students (Blackwell, Oxford, 2003)

I wrote this book for college-based students, and it goes into a lot more detail about writing essays, preparing and giving presentations, as well as containing more advice about revision strategies and exam techniques in university contexts. I also include suggestions on job-hunting, writing letters of application, making a good CV, and preparing for interviews.

How to get a good degree (Open University Press, Buckingham, 1998)

This book isn't just for high-fliers, but also for anyone who wants to be a high-flier. It's about how to go about getting better marks not only for exams, but also for essays, reports and all the other things which contribute to getting a university degree.

How to win as a final-year student (Open University Press, Buckingham, 2000)

In this book, my aim is to help students with the particular challenges they face during their final year at university. This includes revising for and passing final-year exams, but also preparing to seek good job opportunities.

The lecturer's toolkit (2nd edition, Kogan Page, London, 2001)

I spend the other half of my life helping lecturers in higher and further education to develop their teaching and assessment methods. This book sums up this side of my work, and may be of interest to you if you plan to direct your experience of open learning into teaching others.

RESPONSES TO SELF-ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

Responses to SAQ 1

I've chosen to become an <i>open</i> learner because:	
Reasons:	My response to you, if you put a ✓ for this option:
There is no 'conventional' course available.	This is a good reason for choosing to become an open learner. It shows you're the sort of person who doesn't just stop if there isn't a ready-made course suitable to you. You'll still need to hang on to your determination, however, to keep you going on your open learning pathway. Remember that it's very much up to you now – the ball is in your court.
I can't fit a conventional course into my lifestyle or routine.	This is another good reason for choosing to be an open learner now. This indeed is exactly why many open learning routes have been designed in the first place. You're in good company. Many very successful learners work their way to all sorts of qualifications by open learning. And lots of people simply use open learning to gain new skills, sometimes just for fun. If the only people to gain the benefits of improving their knowledge were those with access to conventional courses, it would be unfair on many other people.
I don't like conventional courses!	Neither do I! Many people don't like conventional courses, for all sorts of different reasons. Some were made to feel inferior last time they did such a course. Adults don't like being treated like kids. (Neither do kids, of course). Yet in many colleges or training centres, some people at least feel put down. In your open learning programme, you should indeed feel that you're being treated as a grown-up. This does of course mean that you've got to take on board the various responsibilities which come with managing your own learning – more about these later in this booklet.

I want to work at my own pace.	<p>Me too! Most people work best at their own pace. On conventional courses, if the pace is too fast we get lost. If it's too slow, we get bored. It rarely seems to be just right.</p> <p>For most things, it doesn't really matter how fast we learn – what really matters is <i>how well</i> we learn. The important thing is what we can <i>do</i> when we've learned things. The beauty of a well-designed open learning course is that it gives you plenty of opportunity to find out for yourself how well you're getting on – all the way through your studies and not just at the end. You get plenty of practice at doing the important things you're learning.</p>
I want to work at places of my own choosing, for example at home and/or at work.	<p>A good choice. If you're studying wherever you want to, you've got a lot more opportunity to learn. You don't have to be at a particular place to get on with at least some of your studying. So studying becomes a normal part of your life at home or at work (or better, at both).</p>
My boss told me to do the course!	<p>This is indeed some people's reason for doing an open learning course, but it's usually not the best of reasons. It's about ownership, really. If <i>you</i> really want to do something, you'll do it a lot better than if someone else wants you to do it. None of us really likes to be told to get on and do something.</p> <p>One of the advantages of open learning is that you haven't got anyone standing over you telling you what to do all the time you're studying. And as you get into open learning, you're likely to find good reasons of your own for putting your back into your studies, and it will then become less important that your boss set you off on your learning in the first place.</p>
Someone told me that it was a good way of studying.	<p>This can be a good reason for starting on some open learning. If someone you know inspired you to have a go at it yourself, you may well have caught some of their enthusiasm, which is a good thing. Hopefully, you too will find it a good way of learning things, and will yourself be recommending open learning to other people soon.</p>

I've got my own reasons (enter these below)	I can't, of course, reply directly to your reasons for choosing open learning rather than 'conventional' learning, if you wrote some of your own down when you did SAQ 1. However, I can suggest that you check for yourself how strong these reasons may be. For example, will your own reasons be likely to keep you going when the going gets a bit tough? All learning has its easy bits and its hard bits – and it's dangerously easy to stop in your tracks when you come to a hard bit when you're an open learner. That's why it's important to have some good reasons to keep you going.
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Responses to SAQ 2

I'm studying because:

Options	Response
I was bored and needed a challenge.	This is an interesting reason for studying. Learning new things is certainly a way of finding challenges, and if you were bored you are likely to have sufficient time to be able to study. However, suppose something comes up which is more interesting? Would that mean that you'd no longer be bored, and you'd abandon your studying?
The topic I'm studying will be useful to me in my job.	This is a good reason for studying. It means that you have a sense of purpose, which will be helpful to you at those times when studying gets a bit hard. Also, the fact that you'll be able to put the things you're learning to work in your job, you'll get more satisfaction than if you'd just been studying something for its own sake without any chance to apply it.
Mastering this topic could lead me to promotion.	This can indeed be a powerful incentive. It's probably the most frequent reason why people work their way through quite taxing programmes of study. But let's look at two possibilities – firstly how would you feel if after finishing your studies successfully you <i>didn't</i> get promoted? Would you feel cheated or let down? Would you feel you had wasted your time and energy? Or would it have been worthwhile anyway? Secondly, suppose you get promoted halfway through your studies – people often do. Would you then stop studying because your reason for studying has now gone? You can see from the above questions that there are some dangers associated with this particular reason for studying, particularly if it happens to be your <i>only</i> reason for studying.
Mastering this topic could lead to more choice in the jobs I could expect to get.	This is actually a very good reason for studying. Psychologists tell us that every few years it is good for us to change our career directions, at least partially. Such changes stop us from getting stale or stuck in a rut. It can make life more interesting and satisfying. I'm not saying it

	<p>necessarily makes life <i>easier</i> however, it's often easier just to plod on doing the same old thing.</p> <p>However, the more choices you have about what you do, the greater is your chance of picking something you really like doing. Job satisfaction is actually a great deal more important than what we're paid at the end of the day. If you have more choices available, the chance of getting a well paid job is bound to increase too, but more importantly, you have more chance of selecting a really satisfying job too.</p>
Someone told me to study the topic concerned.	<p>Was this your boss, perhaps? Or someone else? Does this mean you're only studying because you <i>have to</i>? Does this in turn mean that you rather resent having to do it? The danger is that if you've got resentful feelings, every little obstacle you come across will seem like a mountain. When things get tougher in your studies (they always do from time to time) you may not feel willing to give it your best shot. If this is your <i>only</i> reason for studying, it could be worth you trying to find some additional reasons of your own. Ask yourself firmly 'what's in it for <i>me</i>?'</p>
I've always wanted to study this topic, and now's my chance.	<p>This seems to be a fine reason for studying something, at least at first sight. Many people make this reason work for them. But what would happen if when you get a bit deeper into the subject, you find it a lot harder than you expected it to be? Just about everything is easy at first, but gets tougher when you get deeper into it. The worst thing that could happen to you is that you'd sail along while the going was easy, but get fed up with the topic when it got a bit harder. So if this is your main reason for studying, you'll do well to try to build some extra reasons to help you to keep going.</p>
I simply like learning new things.	<p>This is of course a good reason for studying, as long as you'll still be prepared to keep going when the going becomes tougher (as it always does when you get deeper into learning about anything new).</p>
A friend or colleague studied it, and seemed to enjoy it.	<p>This can be a useful reason for studying, as you already know that someone has done it successfully <i>and</i> found it interesting and valuable. Check, however, that you're not just going through the same studying to prove that you're as good as your friend or colleague. It can be useful to ask them what <i>their</i> reasons for studying were when they started out, and whether these reasons were strong enough to keep them going when things weren't too easy. Don't be afraid to borrow other people's good reasons for studying, and add them to your own. The more good reasons you've got, the better.</p>
I want to prove to someone that I'm better than he or she thinks I am!	<p>At least this is an <i>honest</i> reason. In fact, for some people, it can be a very powerful one. Some people achieve great things just to 'show' someone else! But does what other people think about you really matter so much? What <i>really</i> matters is what you think of yourself. It's best to have some reasons for studying which really belong to you, and which don't depend on other people or their reactions to you.</p>
I want to prove to myself that I'm up	<p>This can indeed be a strong reason for doing something.</p>

to it.	Perhaps you've already been successful at learning things in the past, and remember how good the feeling is when you've achieved something. Don't, however, be too hard on yourself. It's even more important that you <i>enjoy</i> your studying. That way, your success will be all the more guaranteed – we put much more into things that we enjoy doing.
I tried this in the past and didn't succeed, so now I want to prove I can do it.	Many people in this position have another go at learning something, and often choose open learning for this. One advantage of open learning this time round is the comfort of privacy – you can get things wrong without other people seeing your mistakes. You can then learn from these mistakes. Be careful, however, not to brood too much on the fact that you didn't succeed in the past. That was then. Now is now. It's a brand new chance to have a go.
I want to be able to keep up with my children, and help them in their studies.	This indeed can be a healthy reason for you doing some studying of your own now. Besides, there are further benefits. When children see parents studying, they pick up the useful impression that studying is a perfectly normal part of life, and are much more likely to put more into their own studies following on from your example.
I've got other reasons of my own (jot these down below to remind you what they are):	I can't of course comment on your own particular reasons for studying. The main thing for you to do is to check out that these reasons are strong enough to help to keep you going through rough and smooth alike. Only you can check this out!

Responses to SAQ 3

How do you see yourself timetabling your study patterns? Which of the following is closest to your way of doing things? Which of the following tastes or inclinations are likely to shape *your* particular strategy for managing your study time? If you chose particular tendencies of inclinations as being 'very like me', please read my responses below – you may find me challenging your rationale more than once!

Time-management tendencies or inclinations...	My response if you chose 'This is very like me!'
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<p>I like to plan a nice tight schedule for studying, for example: Mondays, 7.15 – 9.00 p.m., Wednesdays, 6.00 – 8.00 p.m. and so on.</p>	<p>Congratulations if you're someone who has made studying to a tight schedule work for you in the past. It takes a lot of self-discipline. Can I ask you one or two rather painful questions, however?</p> <p>Do you sometimes find yourself thinking about all sorts of other things during your planned study sessions?</p> <p>Are you sure that you can maintain your efficiency even when other things are on your mind?</p> <p>It's good to have a tight schedule if you find that you enjoy working that way, even when the going is a bit tough. But, one further question: Might there be lots of other useful times when you could be doing a bit of study, when you don't try simply because they're not on your schedule?</p> <p>A schedule can become an excuse to do nothing in all the unscheduled times!</p>
<p>I tend to work in bursts when the mood takes me. I don't like the idea of regimenting my study times!</p>	<p>So you work in bursts when the mood takes you, and you don't like being regimented? This is, of course, fine so long as enough work is getting done, steadily and surely. After all, we're talking about open learning, you're in charge of the times and pace.</p> <p>Now, when things are going well and you're full of enthusiasm, you'll obviously get a lot of work done this way. Probably you'll do much more than you would have if you'd been working to a schedule. But:</p> <p>What happens when the going gets a bit tough? What if your enthusiasm temporarily deserts you?</p> <p>Does this mean you might simply stop in your tracks?</p> <p>Would some sort of schedule help then, or is there a better way?</p>

<p>I've got a busy week, so I'll have to study at weekends. I expect I'll be able to fit one or two long spells of study into most weekends.</p>	<p>Many open learners have busy weeks and work at weekends. It seems a fact of life that weekends are regarded as the time when miracles are possible! I once wrote for an editor who always set deadlines for receiving manuscript on Tuesdays because he knew very well that most authors get behind schedule and make desperate attempts to catch up during the last available weekend, so the manuscript would be in the post Monday morning and (with luck!) would be on his desk on Tuesday. The trouble with only working at weekends is that studying doesn't quite become a full part of one's life. A lot can be forgotten from one weekend to the next. Also, families and friends can feel neglected if there's no time for them at weekends.</p>
<p>I'll study whenever there's nothing else crying out to be done.</p>	<p>Well done for being prepared to study at any time and not just in scheduled bursts or during weekends. But be honest, there are always going to be other things needing doing. Maybe they've needed doing for months. Could you say there's been a time when you have caught up with <i>everything</i>?</p> <p>Now, the real danger is that when the studying gets a bit difficult, all those other things suddenly seem more attractive and more urgent! I'm sure there are plenty of ceilings that got painted as an escape from an hour or two of hard studying!</p>
<p>I can fit in half-an-hour of study now and then at work, so I'll build studying into most days alongside work.</p>	<p>This is fine, as long as it works. If your boss is supportive regarding your studying, and won't give you black looks when you've got your head buried in papers now and then, you're at an advantage.</p> <p>But things at work can get busy. If there's just no work-time available for studying some weeks, will this mean that you simply won't do <i>any</i> studying?</p>
<p>I do quite a bit of travelling. I expect I'll be able to fit some studying into my journeys.</p>	<p>So you do quite a bit of travelling? So do I. I too manage to do quite a bit of work, especially on trains, and in hotel rooms when away from home. I'll be saying more using odd bits and pieces of time in Section 4.</p>

None of the above fits me. The way I'll work is as follows (jot it down please):	Of course, only <i>you</i> know whether your time-management tactics will really work for you. However, if you've read through the responses to the other options above, perhaps you'll agree with my comments about the dangers (and advantages) of the various options discussed. How do these comments fit your way of studying? The real questions to ask yourself about your method are: Will I make best use of my available time? Will enough useful work get done steadily? Will my method continue to work when other important things crop up in my life?
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Responses to SAQ 4

Where will you do *your* learning? Look below at my responses to whichever option (or options) are closest to your situation.

Where will you do your studying?	
Options	Responses
I'll have to sort out a suitable study area at home.	You're in good company. Most open learners when first starting to study this way need to sort out something at home first. But be careful! It's possible to spend a long time sorting things out at home, rather than actually getting some learning under way. Remember the dangers of all those other 'urgent' jobs?
I've no problem, I've already got a good place for studying at home.	Congratulations. Even though you've already got a suitable place, there are dangers to be avoided. Will your place at home be the only place you'll use for studying? When you're not actually in this dedicated space, will you then feel there's no need to do anything related to your studies?
I'll have to go out to study, maybe to a library or some such place.	True, when you get to this location you may indeed work efficiently. But will you actually get there when there's a force eight wind blowing, or a foot of snow, or if you've got a bit of a cough? Would somewhere more accessible help you to increase your chances of actually getting down to some studying?

<p>I'll be doing much of my studying at work, where I have a suitable place.</p>	<p>I've got facilities at work too. My shared room even has such luxuries as a phone, a computer, a light and a door! And I have a key to the building, so I can go there any time. But what happens? When I study there during the day, the phone rings. It's easier chatting on the phone than studying! And the door keeps opening and colleagues come in and say 'Oh, what are you up to now?' and its more relaxing to tell them all about it than to continue doing some studying. So, though I often study at my workplace, it certainly isn't the only place I use.</p>
<p>I've got a garden shed! Are you suggesting that I turn this into a study?</p>	<p>I envy you! I haven't got a shed. I haven't a garden, in fact, and I miss gardening. I do have a small yard but no room for a shed. A shed could serve as a study, away from many of the distractions abound in homes. But it would have to be a comfortable shed, wouldn't it? It would need some mod cons like coffee making facilities, heat and so on. And a comfortable armchair for those little rests between elements of studying. Or those longer rests between little elements of studying. Or just those rests?</p>
<p>I'm an online learner, so most of my learning will have to be done at a computer – whether at home or at work.</p>	<p>Right – but only partly right. If your online learning really requires you to be connected online to do anything study-related, you're in a bit of a quandary. It means when you're not connected you won't do anything related to your learning. Now in fact, the secret of being a good online learner is also being a good offline learner too – in other words still being able to do things relating to your studying when you're nowhere near the technology.</p>
<p>Help! I really don't know where I'm going to find space to do my learning.</p>	<p>If you've already read the rest of the responses I gave above, you'll have noticed that even the best places to study have problems associated with them. In fact, it's more useful if you can do at least <i>some</i> of your studying in less-than-ideal circumstances, than to search endlessly for the ideal place. What's more important is that you study efficiently – more of that later in this guide. It's only too easy to sit in the best study in the world and daydream!</p>

Responses to SAQ 5

Rate each of the following options in terms which you think are good indicators of studying really efficiently.				
Option	Always a good indicator	Often a good indicator	Sometimes a good indicator	Seldom a good indicator
Knowing that I'm spending plenty of time studying.				√
Having made lots of notes as I studied the topic.		√		
Having the feeling that I know the subject well after I've studied it for a while.				√
Having tested myself out by doing plenty of practice at answering questions on each subject as I study it.	√			
Continuing to check out that I can achieve the intended learning outcomes associated with each element of studying.	√			
<p>Comment on option 1: It's good to know you are spending plenty of time at your studies but that's not a guarantee that you're using that time efficiently. Perhaps you could achieve twice as much in half the time? Perhaps you could then afford much more time off doing the other things that make up your life? Time can be deceptive. There's no substitute for practising answering questions and practising doing things.</p>				
<p>Comment on option 2: Having made lots of notes is often a good indicator that you've been studying efficiently. At least, it's good if you've <i>made</i> lots of notes, and not just copied out lots of notes. The point about <i>making</i> notes is that you are involved in processing the information, and sorting it out in your mind as you go. That's not something that happens too well if you're just copying things out.</p>				
<p>Comment on option 3: it's a comfortable feeling when you believe you know a topic well after you've studied it for a while. However, feelings can be deceptive. What's more important is that you can <i>prove</i> to yourself that you know the topic well. And even more important, can you prove <i>to other people</i> that you know it well? Can you <i>show</i> that you know it? This means in turn can you <i>do</i> things with what you've learned, <i>answer questions</i> about it, <i>make deductions</i> from what you know, <i>explain things</i> to other people, <i>describe</i> things, perhaps <i>draw</i> things, possibly <i>calculate</i> things, <i>interpret</i> things, and so on? All of the words in italics here have one thing in common – they're about being able to answer questions about what you've learned. All exam questions contain words like these. So option 4 is much safer than option 3 – see below.</p>				
<p>Comment on option 4: this is a good choice. This is what efficiency is really about. When you get yourself into the position that you can answer lots and lots of questions about what you've been learning, only then can you be certain that you've spent your time learning it efficiently. The real pleasure comes with being confident that you can <i>show</i> that you know it, and not just feeling that you know it.</p>				

Comment on option 5: this too is a good choice. In some ways, it's an even better choice than option 4 above. If you know that you can achieve the intended learning outcomes associated with what you're learning, you can be confident that you're going to be able to show that you know it *to the required standards*. This means, of course, that you'll be able to answer all those questions about it which I've been hinting at in my comments to options 3 and 4 above. In just about all *assessed* open learning programmes, what's actually assessed is your achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Responses to SAQ 6

Here are my responses to the feelings you could have at the point of sending your *first* open learning assignment to a new tutor.

How you might be feeling at this point in time?	Responses
I'm glad that assignment is finished at last!	Naturally. Most people have struggled at least a little with that <i>first</i> assignment. 'Is it really finished, or should I spend another day on it?'
I'm apprehensive – a bit scared.	Many open learners are at least a little bit scared at this point – some are petrified! All the better of course if <i>you</i> will be cool, calm and unruffled.
I'm excited – I want to know how I've done.	This is natural. You will be wanting some feedback now. Hoping for good feedback of course.
I'm worried about what this tutor might say to me.	This too is natural. You won't be sure about what your tutor might say about things you didn't do too well.
I'm afraid of showing myself up.	This is a reasonable fear – no-one likes to feel they may have made a fool of themselves.
Is my work going to be tidy enough?	This depends of course how tidy you think your work is. You may have been criticised in the past for messy work (like me!).
I hope my spelling is OK, and my punctuation, and so on.	This can indeed be a worry. The assignment may be about other things entirely, but spelling and punctuation could still be an issue. Will this tutor be easily upset by such things?
I feel exposed and vulnerable.	If this is likely to be one of your feelings, you're in good company. Many open learners feel exposed and vulnerable at this particular moment – but they usually feel much better once they get round to the <i>second</i> assignment and so on.
Will this tutor think that my work is good enough?	Another natural reaction. Particularly with this <i>first</i> assignment, it can be hard to know how good is good enough.

Will this tutor give me lots of critical feedback, and will this upset me?	Critical feedback is indeed possible – perhaps this will be really useful to you – but not if you let it upset you too much of course.
How quickly will I hear from this tutor?	This varies from one programme to another. Sometimes you might get really quick feedback – for example by email. Alternatively, it could seem a very long time until you hear from your tutor.
Will I get all defensive if my work is criticised?	This of course is your business. If this isn't like you, well done, you learn all the more from critical feedback if you don't get yourself hurt by it.
I'm looking forward to being told how good my work is	This is fine, if you think you've done a really good job. But beware pride coming before a fall – there still could be things you didn't do as well as you thought you'd done them.
Other feelings and questions: write your own below:	I can't of course reply directly to your other feelings or questions, but they could be really useful for you to keep in mind, and to check out in practices when you do indeed reach the point of sending your first assignment to your tutor.

Responses to SAQ 7

Here are my responses to 'this is very like me' for each of the statements about revision. Look particularly at those which were 'very like you'.

Statements about revision	Response if it's 'very like you'
1. I always leave revision till the last minute – and then wish I'd started it much, much earlier!	You're in the same mess most people get themselves into! You'll certainly have painful memories of revision. You'll know inside that you need to do something about that 'wish I'd started it earlier' bit. But will you do anything? Well, I think you'll only do something about it when you find out how to make the work involved more active, more enjoyable, more efficient – and less time-consuming. That's what Section 7 of this booklet is about.

<p>2. I sit there trying to work for hours and hours, and often feel that my poor old brain just isn't taking anything in.</p>	<p>No wonder your brain feels it isn't taking things in – it isn't! You're being cruel to your brain. What's worse, you've been wasting a lot of the time you've been spending, and tiring yourself out pointlessly. You've probably been quite 'passive' for most of those long hours. When you've tried out the active processes I'm suggesting in Section 7, you'll find that saturated brain feeling is a thing of the past.</p>
<p>3. I practise systematically all the way through my studies and enjoy the feeling of always being on top of my work.</p>	<p>Are you sure? I only ask because so few people say that this option is 'very like me'. If this really is the case – splendid. I hope you'll find the ideas in this Section may give you even greater satisfaction in your studies, and perhaps increase your efficiency further. If, however, this option was 'not at all like you', all the more reason to study Section 7 particularly carefully.</p>
<p>4. I don't do any real 'swotting', I just rely on having been conscientious all the way through my course.</p>	<p>If this is 'very like you' there's quite a risk. In a nutshell, you could be in the position that you <i>know</i> your subjects well enough, yet remain unpractised in <i>applying</i> what you know. In other words, you could still end up slow and inefficient at <i>giving it back</i> in the sort of way that you might need during the heat of an exam. In that case, working carefully on my suggestions in Section 7 could be really useful for you.</p>
<p>5. I find all sorts of reasons to put off the evil moment of actually starting any revision!</p>	<p>If you said this is 'very like me' at least you're honest. However, we've already looked at excuses versus reasons in Sections 3 and 4 of this booklet, and this is still the real issue here. Meanwhile, did you actually <i>enjoy</i> all those days you didn't actually get round to revising? Or did you have a guilty conscience because you knew you should be doing something and weren't actually doing it? In fact, you may well have used up far more energy with your excuses and guilty conscience than it would have taken to make a big impact on getting some real revision started.</p>

6. I revise in a cool, calm, organised and systematic way as exams approach.	Well done if your revision gets done in a cool, calm, organised and systematic way. But do you just do this as exams approach? The nearer an exam looms, the harder (as I'm sure you will have found) it is to be cool, calm and so on. It's best to invest in revision well before exams are actually looming. Then you've got all the more time to devote to practising, so that when the important day comes you'll be not only knowledgeable but well-practised.
7. I base my revision strategy on practising, so that by the time I need to, I've practised everything important until I can do things, quickly and efficiently, without any problems.	If this is very like your way of approaching revision, very well done. This is exactly what Section 7 of this booklet intends to get you to do. Read on and see if there are some extra little ways to polish up your technique.

Responses to SAQ 8

What were your feelings about exams? Look in particular at my responses to the options which you rated as 'very like me!'.	
Feelings about exams	Responses
1. I'm scared stiff of exams! They terrify me! It's not a game I like at all.	<p>If this is very like you, you're not alone! But there's no need to be scared. Be honest; ask yourself the following three questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will your life be in danger? • Could you get injured? • Will you be insulted or harangued? <p>None of these of course. "That's all very well" you may be saying "but you don't know what I go through when I do an exam!". One more question then.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the absolute <i>worst</i> that could happen? <p>You probably are thinking "I could <i>fail</i> the exam!" If so, there's a lot of help in this section to make sure that you pass this time. And even if you don't, it's not the worst thing that will ever happen to you.</p>
2. I don't seem to do as well in exams as I know I could have done – there must be something wrong with my exam technique.	<p>If this is very like you, you've already identified something really useful – you can indeed improve your technique. In this section, you'll find a lot of suggestions for doing exactly this. Even if your technique is already very good, you may still be able to make it even better by adopting some of the advice in this section of the booklet.</p>

<p>3. Exams don't bother me – in fact I quite enjoy them. I quite like the exam game.</p>	<p>Well done if this is very like you. Life is much happier at exam time if you quite enjoy exams – that's obvious. If this isn't like you at all, however, don't lose heart. This section aims to help you to enjoy exams much more than you do presently.</p>
<p>4. I don't think exams are fair – they're not a good way of measuring how well people have learned things.</p>	<p>Some exams are fairer than others. At least they are fair in so much as all the candidates are in the same boat, and have to do what they can with the same mixture of questions in a given exam. One of the problems is that people often take exam <i>results</i> too seriously. People who have not managed to pass a particular exam on a particular occasion may well have learned the subject concerned perfectly well, but simply not done themselves justice on that occasion. That's why this section aims to help you to make sure that you do indeed do yourself justice next time you have an exam.</p>
<p>5. I'm lucky! I usually do better in exams than I actually deserve to do. I must just be good at playing the exam game.</p>	<p>If this is very like you, your exam technique must already be good. However, you'll do even better if you know <i>how</i> your technique is good, and become better at playing to your strengths. This section should help you to do this.</p>
<p>6. I've had some bad times in exams in the past, and am worried that I'll re-live some of the nightmares yet again next time I have an exam.</p>	<p>If this option is very like you, take heart – you're in good company. Most people remember the nightmares for a long time. But regard each nightmare as a useful learning experience. Section 8 will help you to find out more about what may have <i>caused</i> particular nightmares, and this in turn means you'll become better able to steer round them in future.</p>