

Study Advice Services

Part of the IfL Centre for Learning Development

Independent Learning

This booklet contains information and activities that will help you to consider:

- What is meant by independent learning
- How independent learning can help you
- How to set about learning independently

What is meant by “independent learning”?

One broad definition of independent learning or “autonomy” in learning is:
“the ability to take charge of one’s learning” Holec (1981: 3)

By the time you get to university, you probably already are an independent learner, to at least some degree, and you will have “taken charge of” a proportion of your learning. When you were at school or college you will have found that as you became older and started on A-levels, your teachers gave you more choices instead of telling you exactly what to do and when to do it. They expected you to take more **responsibility** for your work.

Think of a specific instance when you were expected to be more responsible than previously for organising yourself and your work. What were your reactions? Did you find the experience unnerving or did you see it as an exciting challenge?

Being able to make informed **choices** and taking **responsibility** for your own learning activities are two facets of learning independently. It may be that in the activity above you thought back to an occasion when you decided on your own title for an essay or the topic for a project that *you* wanted to work on and then completed by a certain deadline. A key word here would be “wanted”:
motivation is vital for successful independent learning. Another important element in independent learning is feeling **confident** enough to actually take decisions and act on those decisions. You also need to appreciate the value of **reflecting** on your learning and deciding whether it has been effective or whether you need to try another approach.

At school, what you learn is largely decided by your teachers, who are in turn constrained by curricula. However, even at school, you may have been aware of having weaknesses in some areas and decided to devote extra time and energy to making improvements. On the other hand, there may have been certain subjects which were your strengths and which you particularly enjoyed. As a result you may have chosen to do “extra” work in these subjects. You were learning independently, deciding what to do, how to do it and whether it was worthwhile.

Can you remember an occasion when you *chose* to do “extra” when at school? It may not have been an academic activity but in the realm of sport or music, for example. What motivated you and what was the outcome of your independent work?



Does independent learning mean working on your own?

No, independent learning does not mean working on your own. You may well find that you share a problem with another student on your course or even in another discipline. Working with someone else, encouraging each other and talking through difficulties may be the most effective and motivating way of working independently. If you have a problem, explaining it to someone else can help to clarify issues for you. Explaining a concept to someone without shared background knowledge is a very good way of making sure *you* understand the full implications of the concept.

How can independent learning help you?

Being able to work independently is a skill highly valued by employers so it may ultimately help you in securing a job. In the short term, it may help you to feel more “**in control**” of what you are doing.

- Setting your own goals and deadlines
- Organising yourself, your work and your time
- Evaluating your use of time and your work are some elements of independent learning. They can have immediate benefits in being more efficient and effective.

The general area of “**Study Skills**” may be an area for independent learning. Weaknesses in any of the skills given in the activity below will mean you are not working as effectively as you might. Devoting some time to improving study skills will clearly be helpful. Again it may be better for you to work on these skills with someone else, rather than on your own.

From the skills below, decide whether there are any you need to improve. What priority rating would you give to the need, from 1 (really need to make changes) to 5 (room for some improvement here but not urgent)

- Organising yourself and your time*
- Note-taking*
- Gathering and using information*
- Reading*
- Listening
- Writing*
- Speaking*
- Remembering*
- Working with others*

Do you feel you can work on your weaker skills yourself or would some advice and support be welcome? If you'd like support, there are leaflets available for the skills marked with an asterisk (more will be available in the future). These leaflets can be printed out from the Study Advice Services website (www.hull.ac.uk/studyadvice). Alternatively you could arrange to see a Study Skills Adviser for a one-to-one chat about your difficulties. Often it can help just to talk through problems and you will end up seeing solutions yourself.

The areas where you need or want to work independently may, on the other hand, relate directly to your particular **subject(s) of study**. Here, any independent work will increase your confidence and may help you both immediately and when it comes to exams or other assessments. Have you, for example, considered reading around a topic *before* a lecture is given on it? This type of independent preparation can help you to gain much more from the lecture itself because you are in tune with the subject matter and can think more critically about what is being presented.

How to set about learning independently?

First you will need to carefully **analyse** just what your **problems and weaknesses/special interests** are. (In the area of Study Skills you will have already made an initial analysis in the activity above.) For example, if you are studying a language, is your weak area broadly grammar, vocabulary, writing, speaking, listening, or reading? If you decide that grammar is the problem area you'll then need to break this down further to decide what aspect/s cause problems - for example past tenses of verbs or word order in a sentence.

Once you've decided exactly what your specific problems/interests are, you can draw up a list. Which need to be addressed the most urgently or is there a natural, logical order in which to tackle them? In other words, work out your **priorities**. Whatever your subject, don't be afraid to **return to the basics if necessary**. It may give you more confidence in the long run to ensure you have a firm understanding of basic concepts and techniques.

It will probably pay you to **set aside a specific time** each week for your independent work and write it down in your timetable. Unless a time is allocated in this way, it's all too easy for independent work to be squeezed out by other activities and good intentions can wither away.

Look at your timetable. Where could you usefully fit in some independent study? Is there an odd hour, for example, between a lecture and a seminar, which usually just seems to disappear? Could that time be regularly used for independent work? Organising and reading over lecture notes for example or going to the library and reading a journal that you wouldn't otherwise get round to?

Your next step will be to work out a realistic **study-plan** for your work. What goals could you realistically set yourself? Don't make them too ambitious but set **minor goals** or **targets** that you know you will be able to achieve without having to spend a very long time working on them. How many hours will you need to achieve them? How will you know when you've achieved them?

Try giving yourself clear aims:

“By the time I've read and made notes on ...

I'll be able to plan almost any essay on the topic of...”

When you work independently, it's a good idea to keep a **record** of the work you've done. This can help with further planning and also give a sense of achievement as well as provide something to include in a progress file. As time goes by you may surprise yourself with what you've been able to cover. This could motivate you to keep going as could increased confidence and even improved results!

Your record need not be elaborate – simply a series of A4 sheets, for example, with a column for the date, one for the work covered and one for your **reflections** on the work. Reflecting on what you've done can help you decide whether the activity was really effective, whether an alternative approach might be better on another occasion, whether you spent the right amount of time and whether you achieved the target you'd set yourself.

Once you've achieved the target, the process of planning can start again. Your needs and priorities may have changed, so think about them and then set yourself **another target**.

Independent learning can become a lifelong habit.

All web addresses in this leaflet were correct at the time of publication

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request from Sue Hodgson, telephone 01482 466199.