

# **A BRIEF GUIDE TO STUDY SKILLS**

**for Bible College Students**



**by Rev. Michael Button**

**(Revised edition 2014)**



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### **INTRODUCTION**

Study is both a science and an art. As a science, it involves organisation of information and ideas to achieve recognisable outcomes - namely those of knowledge and understanding. As an art, it is developing skills in assimilating information.

Do not be alarmed at the thought of studying at what is perhaps a greater depth than you have experienced before. You have what it takes above all other considerations - *motivation*, or else you will not have enrolled for a course of study in the first place. The “science” you can apply by following the procedures suggested in this booklet. The “art” you can develop by using the procedures imaginatively as you grow in confidence in your personal style of learning.

This Guide will help you to:

1. Structure study material for revision and presentation.
2. Use mnemonics as memory aids.
3. Assimilate and remember lectures.
4. Assimilate and remember reading material.
5. Find and select suitable material on the internet.
6. Write effective assignments.
7. Write acceptable examinations.
8. Participate effectively in discussions and debates

### **A. ABOUT LEARNING**

**1. Learning is understanding, not just memorizing.** I can memorize the 10 Commandments, but if I don't understand what the Sabbath, adultery, false witness and coveting are, I will not have learnt anything useful.

**2. Intelligence v hard work.** Hard work can count for more than intelligence. Some have a quicker grasp of things than others. If you are not one of those people, don't despair. Everyone needs to work hard at study to achieve their best - which is all that is asked of you. Sometimes those who seem to sail through with little effort fall short in other areas, such as stickability. God has made us all different and, if He has sent you to Bible College, it is because He knows what He wants you to achieve.

**3. Taking things in and remembering them.** This can be made easier by:

(i) *Clear structuring of information.* You will notice this booklet has been structured with subjects, points and sub-points. The structure may not be perfect, but it would be a lot harder to follow and remember if it were to flow seamlessly from one point to another without any logical progression.

(ii) *Relating what is new to something you already know.* The parables told by Jesus are a good example of this. Farming communities knew about growing crops and fishermen knew about fishing, so Jesus talked to them about these things and introduced new spiritual concepts based on what they knew.

(iii) *Thinking through a subject to make sure you understand it.* Don't pass it by until you do, or at least come back to it when your mind is fresh. Don't feel ashamed to ask the subject tutor or share your concerns with your fellow students.

(iv) *Break large blocks of information into small digestible chunks.*

(v) *Repeat information in your own words.* This helps you know if you have understood it. If you can't rephrase it, you probably have not understood it.

(vi) *Use memory aids, such as:*

◆ Mnemonics: words or phrases to remind you of a longer list.

e.g. "Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain"  
for the colours of a rainbow Red Orange Yellow Green Blue Indigo Violet

or ICHTHUS (Gk for *fish*) for the phrase Jesus Christ God's Son, Saviour.

(The Greek words starts with: I ... CH ....TH ... U ... S

◆ Visualise abstracts in concrete images. e.g. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed ... (that) becomes a tree (Matt 13:31f).

(vii) *Imagine teaching the subject to someone.* Think how you would you describe it to help them understand it.

## **B. LECTURES**

Most of your work in the classroom will be in the form of lectures. Lectures are a type of partnership, in which the lecturer tries his hardest to convey what he knows and you try your hardest take it in!

**1. Don't be late.** It causes distraction and it's not fair to others in the classroom.

**2. Lectures are mainly for understanding, not information.** Your information should come from your personal reading and studies. The lecturer provides you with what is needed to understand your reading, and to help you concentrate your reading on what is important, as you will not have time to read everything in every book that is on your reading list.

**3. Learning Outcomes** (sometimes called *Lesson Outcomes* or *Objectives*). Take note of these if they are given. They tell you what you need to learn. You can later test yourself to see whether you have achieved the objectives. Your tutor will test you with the same criteria in an examination or an assignment.

**4. Make notes.** Take notes, even if you are given printed notes. Writing things down aids assimilation.

(i) *Note key points.* Don't try to write down everything, except what needs to be repeated accurately. Only write something out in full if it's a useful quotation or something that needs to be accurately worded.

(ii) *Speed not elegance.* Don't worry about good English or spelling, unless you need to remember how to spell a word. The notes are for your own use, not for publication.

(iii) *Use Abbreviations.* Make up your own abbreviations. It is only you who will have to know what they mean.

(iv) *Don't record the lectures.* You probably won't have time to listen to them again.

## C. READING

You will be doing a lot of reading in the course of your studies.

### (a) Sources

**1. Library.** Make good use of the facilities available. If you borrow books from a library, tutor or fellow student, get from it what you need quickly and return it as soon as you can. It's unfair to other students if they can't get hold of a book because it's lying on your shelf at home.

**2. Buying Books.** Your subject tutor might suggest books that will be useful to always have available if you can afford them.

Useful books to have at hand for Biblical and Theological studies are\* :

- Single volume Bible Commentaries
- Bible Dictionary
- Bible Encyclopaedia
- English dictionary
- English Thesaurus (for writing assignments)

It is good to have two or three Bible versions for comparison.

**3. Relevance.** Check what you need to read before starting, rather than read irrelevant chapters. If you make use of books other than those recommended, see who wrote or edited them and who published them. They are not all suitable for purpose. Ask your tutor if you are unsure.

**4. Records.** Keep a list of the books or articles you have read, with the author's name, title, edition, publisher, place and date of publication. You may need these for acknowledgement and bibliographies in assignments, or in case you need to return to a book later.

## **(b) Method**

**1. Pre-scan sections for relevance.** A glance at a paragraph or section might give you some idea if it is worth spending time on detailed reading.

**2. Synopsise in captions and short phrases: MAIN HEADINGS**  
**Minor Headings**  
**Sub-points**

The section and paragraph headings in these notes are an example of this. The notations are arbitrary (you will notice I use Capital letters for Main Headings and small Roman numerals for Minor Headings thus: A.(i).♦) but they are useful for quick references and later referral. A broadly similar style is used in newspapers, with large Headlines followed by short summaries in bold print before the text in normal print.

(See also the Mind Map method described below, under *Assignments*, D.4.)

Put page numbers in the margin in case you need to re-read the original later. Use your own words. Only copy verbatim if you need the exact words for a quote (in which case make a note of the page number in case you need it later for acknowledgment).

**3. Don't rush.** Wait until you have understood the section you are reading before moving on. If you are struggling and getting nowhere, make a note of

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\* Useful, out-of-copyright, resources are available for free on the Internet, e.g. biblehub.com or blueletterbible.com.



where to find it and come back to it later.

**3. Use a dictionary.** Have one to hand in case you can't understand a word.

**4. Tired?** Take a short break - chill out, have a coffee or take a walk, and come back to your reading refreshed.

## C. INTERNET

It's not the purpose of this Study Guide to teach you I.T. skills. Speak to the Principal or Studies Director if you feel you need help in this area.

**1. Be discriminating.** There are many questionable URL's (websites) on the Internet. This is especially so for Christian websites, not only those of the sects that publish inaccurate material but also inaccurate or biased information put out by poorly informed or highly opinionated contributors.

(i) *It is better to rely on known sources, such as:*

- ◆ Universities. These are academically reliable, though they will usually have a critical approach to Scripture.
- ◆ Trusted Bible teachers. Be cautious though. Don't let fame alone guide you in whom to trust!

(ii) *Use Wikipedia sparingly.* It is tempting to use it, because it's usually the first one to appear on your screen when you do a search, but it might not be the most reliable source of information. You need to look at a wider range of sources.

**2. Narrow your search.** There are literally millions of 'hits' for many subjects. Use an Advanced Search (such as the one in Google) that allows you to be more selective in combining or eliminating words, or use Boolean operatives ("-" to eliminate words, "+" to include other words, and " .... " for a phrase).

**3. Use it as an information tool** not a replacement for hard study and thinking. Anyone can link together a few paragraphs from a web search. Any assignment you write must come from YOU, not from cyberspace.

## D. ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments offer the advantage over exams, of being able to refer to resources rather than rely on memory. They are an opportunity to show you have an understanding of the subject and of the resources available to you. You will not gain good marks if you just list a collection of facts. Your tutor will

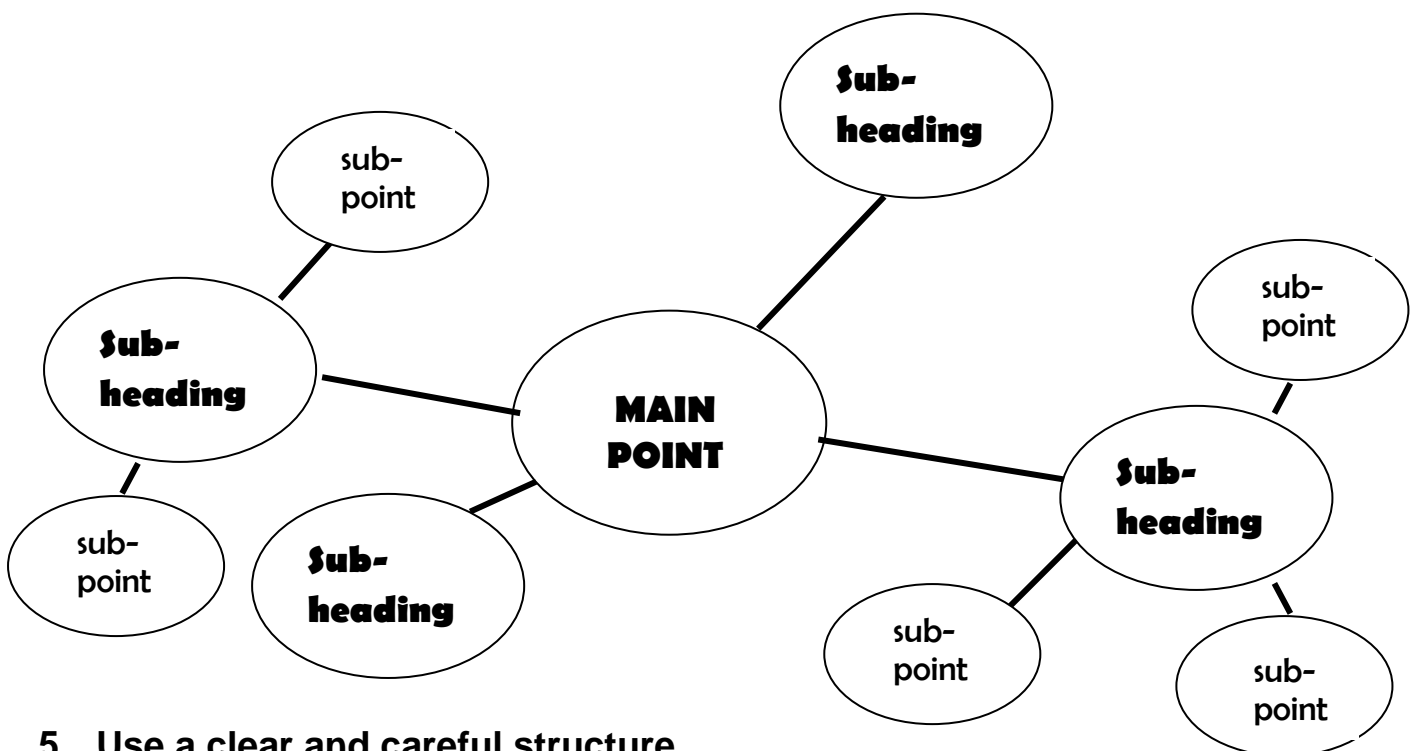
know you have got them from books or the Internet and they do not prove you have got a grasp of the subject.

**1. Start early.** Build up an assignment over time, rather than writing it in a mad dash just before the deadline. You don't have to write it in full all at once. Start with setting down a basic outline. As you do so, you will see what bits of knowledge you are missing and, over time, you can find out what you need to know. If you use a word processor, it will be easy to add bits in and re-arrange the order as the project develops.

**2. Stick to the point - don't ramble.** Irrelevant information scores no marks and uses up your word count wastefully. Learning (or Lesson) Outcomes are important here (see B.3 above).

**3. Stick to the deadlines.** Tutors often have little time to mark assignments before results are due. Rushed marking is likely to result in lower marks. Marks are deducted for every day an assignment is overdue.

**4. Marshall your material in a logical and structured manner.** Rough out an outline, either using the point and sub-point method already described (see under **Reading C(b)2** above), or a mind map if you find this easier to follow. Here is an example of a mind map:



**5. Use a clear and careful structure.**

- ◆ A brief introduction - saying where you intend to go or what you intend to show.

- ◆ Organised paragraphs, each sticking to the point of that paragraph and flowing logically.
- ◆ A brief conclusion, summing up and showing how the objective has been achieved.

**6. Be yourself. Be natural.** Don't try to impress the tutor with high-flowing language. On the other hand - don't be slapdash or use slang.

**7. It must be your own work.** Copying the work of an author or another student is plagiarism. **Plagiarism is cheating.** It is easily detected by tutors and will result in your assignment being disqualified. In extreme cases a student might be dismissed for dishonesty.

- (i) *Quotes.* Short quotes (not long paragraphs) are acceptable to show the validity of your argument, but they must be acknowledged in a footnote and the source listed in the bibliography.
- (ii) *The assignment is to show your personal level of thinking, not the thinking of others.*
- (iii) *You may ask someone to check your work for spelling and grammar, but they must not contribute to the actual content. There is nothing wrong in discussing an assignment subject with fellow students, provided the actual assignment is your own personal work.*

**8. Type or word-processed.** Hand-written work is not favoured by markers and might not be accepted. If you must hand-write them, talk to your tutor before you start to see if it is acceptable, or ask someone to type it out from your hand-written original.

## **E. EXAMS**

**1. Turn up in good time.** Late arrival is extremely disruptive to other students and you might not be admitted.

**2. Don't rush to start writing.** Carefully read:

- (i) *The instructions.* How many questions do you have to attempt and from what sections if any? It is surprising how many candidates attempt too many questions, wasting time and marks. A marker will normally only mark the first few answers, however good the surplus ones may be.
- (ii) *The questions.* Do you really understand what the questions are asking?

### 3. Select which ones to attempt.

- (i) *Which do you feel most confident to answer.*
- (ii) *Read those again. Have you really understood what is being asked? Is there some subtle meaning you might have overlooked on your first reading?*
- (iii) *If you can't find enough questions to answer, first do those you can, then read the remaining questions again. You may gain clarity and find there is one you could try. Don't panic! Sometimes exam questions are obscure. Think about it and you may see the relevance to some part of the course that was not immediately obvious.*

**4. Make brief notes** while you remember them (using mnemonics if you have them). If you are not allowed spare paper, write the notes on the script but remember to cross them out before handing in your paper.

**5. Pace yourself.** You might like to spend a longer proportion of time on your most competent subject, but do this sparingly, for you might need to spend longer on the ones with which you are less confident.

**6. Stick to the point.** You don't have time to waste on irrelevances that will earn you no marks.

### 7. Remember to:

- (i) *Put your name (or number) on the paper.*
- (ii) *Make sure the questions you answered are numbered. If you are asked to list the numbers on the front of the script, make sure you have done so.*
- (iii) *Number your pages and fix your sheets together.*

If you are dyslexic or have a disability that will put you at a disadvantage in written examinations, let the Principal or Studies Director know.

## F. DISCUSSION and DEBATE

These help to clarify thinking on the subject and see all sides of debatable issues.

**1. Don't be afraid to contribute.** Your idea is probably more helpful than you think.

**2. If you disagree, say so,** but give a valid reason for your dissention. Be firm, but polite. Don't be abusive.

**3. Keep your cool.** Don't be provoked into an angry response. Some comments maybe deliberately provocative. Rise to the challenge

## CONCLUSION

Study should be an enjoyable pastime, not a chore. Enjoy it. Give it your best, but don't let it take over every hour of the day. You need rest and exercise. Factor these into your routine and your mind will be all the fresher for it and your studies will benefit.

Now have a stab at the exercises at the end of this booklet. There are no marks for getting them right, but they are an opportunity to practise some of the skills you will need for your more serious studies, in which I wish you success.

Useful website to learn more: [www.skills4study.com](http://www.skills4study.com)

### Bibliography:

Northedge, Andrew, The Good Study Guide, Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2005.

Cottrell, Stella, The Study Skills Handbook (3<sup>rd</sup>. edition), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan,2008.

## **STUDY SKILLS - EXERCISES**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Synopsise the Sermon the Mount (Matthew, Chapters 5-7) with main headings, minor-headings and sub-points.

## **LIBRARY**

Find a copy of each of the following (tick the box when you have found them and leave them on the shelf):

The New Bible Commentary

The Prophecy of Isaiah, by Alec Motyer

## **INTERNET**

Using the internet find out:

1. The names of Herod the Great's sons and daughters.
2. Why there are sudden storms on the Sea of Galilee.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHIES**

Write down the bibliographies of any two books in the College library, in the following fashion:

Northedge, Andrew, The Good Study Guide, Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2005.

- 1.
- 2.

