

A BRIEF GUIDE TO STUDY SKILLS

for Bible College Students

by Rev. Michael Button

INTRODUCTION

Study is both a science and an art. As a science, it involves organisation of information and ideas to achieve recognisable outcomes - namely that 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 them imaginatively as you grow in confidence in your personal style of learning.

This Guide will help you:

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 or 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 them, 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's 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 come back to it when your mind is fresh. Don't feel ashamed to ask the subject tutor or talk to fellow students. If lecturers have asked you save questions until the end of a lecture to avoid interruption, interrupting the lecture jot down a reminder to yourself to ask at question time.

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

(v) *Repeat information in your own words.* It 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. for the colours of a rainbow:

“Richard **O**f **Y**ork **G**ave **B**attle **I**n **V**ain”
Red **O**range **Y**ellow **G**reen **B**lue **I**ndigo **V**iolet

or ICHTHUS (Greek for *fish*) for the Greek words of
Jesus **C**hrist **G**od's **S**on, **S**aviour.

(The Greek words start 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 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.

Late arrival got so bad at one college I know that they had to lock the door when the lecture started. So latecomers missed the lecture.

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

3. Learning Outcomes (sometimes called Lesson Outcomes). 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. (Some of the more academic books might be highly critical of the Scriptures. Some of the more devotional type might not be factual enough.) 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. Synopsis in heading and short phrases: MAIN HEADINGS
Minor Headings.
Sub-points**

(These notes are an example.)

(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 for later 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 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 - have a coffee - chill out - 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. University tutors frown on quotes from Wikipedia.)

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

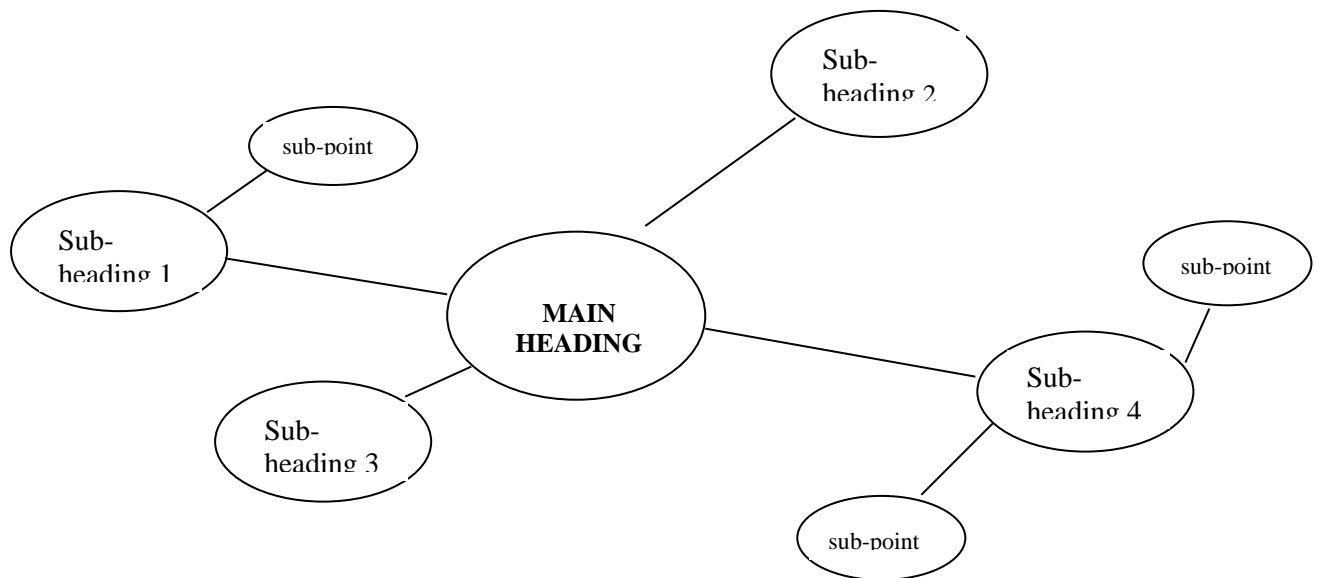
Assignments offer the advantage over exams, of being able to refer to resources rather than rely on memory. They are an opportunity to show you have an understanding of the subject and of the resources available to you. You will not gain good marks if you just list a collection of facts. Your tutor will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

3. Stick to the deadlines. Tutors often have little time to mark assignments before results are due. Rushed marking is likely to be lower marking. Some tutors might deduct marks 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:



One value of a mind map value is when you are using pen and paper you can add other sub-headings and points where you can find a space. It's harder to insert them in a grid when the lines are already fixed.

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.

e.g. "Because of points a, b, c etc. it is clear that"

or "Although a firm conclusion may not be possible, on balance it is most likely"

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 of 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 are.

(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 first reading?

(ii) *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 longer than on the ones you are less confident with.

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/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.

I wish you success.

Now take 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.

Useful website to learn more: www.skills4study.com

Bibliography

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

Cottrell, Stella, *The Study Skills Handbook* (3rd. edition), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

STUDY SKILLS - EXERCISES

SYNOPSIS

Synopsise the Sermon the Mounts (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.

BIBIOGRAPHIES

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.