Exams

Improve Your Study Skills:

A series of Seven Modules by
Virginie Nilsson, Ph.D.
Exams

A Series of Seven Modules for Adult Students
by Virginia Nilsson, Ph.D.

The more I study,
The more I know,
The more I know,
The more I forget,
The more I forget,
The less I know.
So why study?”

Anonymous

Learning Assistance Program
Student Services

Athabasca University
Improve Your Study Skills:

A Series of Seven Modules for Adult Students

1 Getting Started
2 Time Management
3 Reading to Remember
4 Note Taking
5 Writing
6 Surviving the Slumps
7 Exams

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Preface

The first edition of *Improve Your Study Skills: A Series of Seven Modules for Adult Students* was written specifically for Athabasca University students. While there are some aspects of studying and some problems which may be unique to home-study students and to adults just returning to formal study, the series deals with skills and strategies from which all adult students can benefit by becoming better students. This second edition is aimed at "the adult independent learner."

The modular format of the series enables you to concentrate on any one of seven areas, or to work through the material in the order most beneficial to your particular needs. Checklists and surveys providing diagnostic and prescriptive information, and exercises encouraging you to practise the skills and strategies presented make the series interactive. As an adult student you are much more alone, working on your own, unsupported by other students and teachers, than are traditionally aged college and university students. While we are not suggesting that this handbook can take the place of fellow students and helpful and supportive teachers, the interactive nature of the material does facilitate learning and will help you to improve your study behaviours. And the annotated bibliography at the end of each module tells you where you can find information complementary and supplementary to that in the handbook.

Each module concludes with a summary and review section. When answering the questions keep in mind the purpose of the series: to help and encourage you to become a better student by improving your study behaviours and honing your study skills. You can use this section as a self-test of whether you have understood the material.
Introduction

Why an Adult Study Skills Series?

You probably think you don’t need to learn how to study. You’ve studied before. You’ve been to school. What’s this series going to tell you that you don’t already know?

Of course, you have some useful study skills. But as an adult university student, you’ll probably find that you could use some different or additional skills and techniques now. You will need to apply goal- and priority-setting skills to use your time well. You’ll be required to read advanced texts, search original documents, and review scholarly material and intellectual presentations. You’ll be expected to remember in detail what you read and to organize your learning to demonstrate your memory, understanding, problem-solving ability, and creativity for the purpose of evaluation or testing. This kind of learning will demand skills you may not have developed or didn’t use in any previous schooling.

You’ll probably discover that some of your learning styles and strategies will have to change simply because studying will have a different impact on you as an adult than it did when you were younger. For example, research has shown that tasks or methods involving significant time pressure are more difficult for adults than for young people. Although some degree of anxiety is desirable or even necessary in a learning situation, it has been shown that the optimal level of anxiety for adults is lower than for younger people. And for older adults, tasks causing considerable mental or physical fatigue may be a problem. On the other hand, you can take encouragement from the fact that most verbal skills are not influenced by age until quite late in life.
How to Use This Series

This series comprises seven modules, each of which will assist you in developing or refining a different skill. The first module can help you get started in your course and also assist you in determining which other modules in this series might be helpful to you. To make the best use of your time, it is suggested that you try the following general strategy:

1. Read the “Getting Started” module.

2. Complete the Study Skills Self-Assessment in “Getting Started” to determine if you need help and in what areas.

3. Review each of the module summaries that follows the self-assessment and number them in order of need, based on the results of the self-assessment.

4. Go to the modules in the order you have listed them to study the methods that fit your requirements.

5. Do the exercises as you go.

6. Try new ideas one at a time.

7. Test the new methods you’ve learned by applying them.

8. And remember, always pat yourself on the back for a job well done.

An annotated bibliography in each module provides alternative approaches to the same problems or emphasis and elaboration of the same methods. You can find these or similar titles at your local public or school library or bookstore. They are also available on loan from the Athabasca University library.
Will It Work for You?

You may have taken courses before, you may have just begun some courses, or you might be only thinking about university. Whatever the case, some of the tips and techniques presented in this series should help you learn more effectively. For example, we’ll show you how to pace yourself, provide information on how to learn more from your notes, and give you some helpful tips on improving your performance on exams.

Of course, nobody expects you to follow these guidelines to the letter. You will still want to do some things a certain way because that way works for you. This series provides popular and proven methods that can help you make the most of your study efforts. It’s up to you to pick and choose what’s best for you.

There are many factors which contribute to learning, only one of which is study skills. Just doing all of your course-related activities the way the series suggests does not ensure that you will learn or be a successful student. Likewise, you can be a successful student, and you can learn, even if the self-assessments point out that your study habits and behaviour are different from those of most successful students.
Virginia Nilsson, retired Professor of Psychology and Learning Assistance Psychologist at Athabasca University, was for many years a Chartered Psychologist in the Province of Alberta and a member of the Psychologists' Association of Alberta. Dr. Nilsson's extensive experience in adult education, in course development and course delivery, made her aware of the demands that Athabasca University courses place on students and the problems students face in meeting these demands. Hearing the same questions and problems from students over a period of years prompted her to write these study skills modules as a strategy to help students overcome common study skills problems.

Dr. Nilsson earned advanced degrees in Psychology at Columbia University in New York City and at the University of Alberta, specializing in learning theory. She presently resides on a farm near Colinton, Alberta.
# Module 7
## Exams

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Exams

"Now I lay me down to rest
A pile of books upon my chest
If I should die before I wake
That’s one less test I have to take"

Anonymous

What You Should Know About Adult Learning

As the verse above hints, people do not particularly enjoy being tested on what they have learned. But if you want to know whether you have learned what you set out to learn, you must go through some evaluative process.

Preparation for examinations starts when the course begins. As you have learned in the other modules in this series, good study habits, time management, reading to understand and remember, frequent reviews, and relating studies to your everyday life all go a long way towards grooming you for the final exam.

There are a number of striking differences between how you learn and how you perform on exams now, as an adult, and how you did when you were younger. Research in adult education and adult development points to several specific and very important factors of which you should be aware when you are preparing for and writing exams.

Anxiety Level

"It was as if being handed the exam opened a drain, and everything I had learned just left my head."

B.S.

Sound familiar? B.S.’s response to the exam might be attributed to too high an anxiety level. Studies have shown that a high level of anxiety is not as useful to you as an adult as it might have been when you were younger. In many respects high anxiety in young people is reinforced with good exam marks. Getting “hyped” up before exams helps them to perform well. You may be operating according to some of your earlier or younger behaviour patterns and inadvertently raising your anxiety level before the exam. In the past you got good results from this behaviour. But the older you get, the lower is the optimal anxiety level for good performance.
This change means you must try to keep calm if you want to perform your best when taking a test. Self-confidence will help, and self-confidence comes from knowing that you are well prepared:

- Establish contact with your telephone tutor or instructor.
- Keep in touch with your tutor or instructor. If you’re a home-study student, get used to talking on the phone to this tutor person whom you will never meet face-to-face. Tutors and instructors can help you with the course and will mark some of your course work.
- Overview the course materials and read the student handbook or manual so you know what’s in store for you and what’s expected of you. Don’t fall into the “I knew the material, but I didn’t study the right stuff” trap.
- Have a realistic study schedule and try to stick to it.

Pacing

Adults learn best when they can study at their own pace.

If you’re a home-study student, take advantage of the fact that you are in control. Set up a schedule that fits your lifestyle, but that ensures you meet your course contract due dates and deadlines. If you haven’t already done so, read the Time Management module. It will help you set up a workable study schedule.

Feedback

All students need to have assignments and tests marked. You have to know how you do on tests and assignments, not to compare yourself with anyone else, but to see if you have mastered the material. Feedback also provides guidance about what you are doing right and what you need to change, and this function of feedback is much more important for adults than for young people.

Try to find out both where and why you have lost marks on quizzes, tests, and assignments.

- Do you misinterpret questions?
- Do you omit parts of questions by working too quickly?
- Are your answers too superficial?
- Have you misunderstood the material?
- Have you misunderstood the instructions?
- Do you need to support your ideas better?
- Do you make careless mistakes?
This list of questions could go on and on. You can find answers to questions such as these by reviewing the work you have received back. Find out what and how you can do better. That’s one of the important functions of feedback. Your tutor or instructor is available to help you with it. Make sure you get as much feedback as possible on all of your quizzes and assignments. It will make exam time much easier.

Practice

It’s not unusual for students to blame the exam format for their failure. Exams are a new experience which can be very stressful if you don’t know what to expect. That’s why it makes good sense to prepare yourself by practising. The differential value of practice for adults and young people is tied in with anxiety. The more often you expose yourself to testing, the more relaxed you will be when you get to the actual exam.

Testing practice helps reduce anxiety because it provides you with experience in a test situation. It enables you to develop your own approach to whatever type of test you face, whether it’s a pencil and paper quiz or exam, answering questions verbally, writing paragraphs, summarizing, or just thinking things through. With practice you develop the skills and the knowledge necessary to perform at your peak, just as an athlete or artist does.

One of the least threatening ways to practise being tested is to test yourself. Self-testing is ideal for adults because it provides feedback and arouses little anxiety. You can do it at your own speed and within your own schedule. And it enables you to try out different strategies for remembering the course material. Use your course to test yourself. And of course any practice quizzes or exams are excellent for self-testing.
A Pre-exam Checklist

Test yourself on how well you prepare for exams by checking those items on this checklist which you usually do or have done. Before any exam go through this checklist again to remind yourself of what you need to do.

Exam Preparation Checklist

1. ____ Survey the material, bit by bit or section by section as well as overall.
   ___ Read the material carefully for understanding.
   ___ Ask myself questions about the material.
   ___ Recall and recite what I read.
   ___ Make notes on the concepts and key points.
   ___ Review the material frequently.

2. ____ Review my notes. Make sure:
   ___ they are in order,
   ___ they are complete,
   ___ they make sense,
   ___ and I understand them.
   ___ Allow adequate time leading up to the exam to review at spaced intervals—perhaps forty-five minutes a day.
   ___ Do a final, complete review the day before the exam.

3. ____ Decide what information needs memorizing.
   ___ Practise recalling information. Do this by:
     ___ reciting aloud,
     ___ telling another person,
     ___ or writing the information down.
   ___ Check to be sure that what I recall and recite is correct.

4. ____ Try to predict what will be on the exam by noting:
   ___ what has been stressed by the course objectives,
   ___ what concepts or issues have been repeated during the course,
   ___ how much time has been devoted to different topics,
   ___ what the tutor or instructor has stressed.
5. ___ Find out as much as I can about the exam.
    ___ Ask my tutor/instructor about the exam.
    ___ Find out the time limit.
    ___ Ask if it is multiple choice or essay.
    ___ Find out if I can take anything into the exam.
    ___ Ask if the exam format will be the same as the course quizzes.
    ___ Find out what parts of the course will be covered on the exam.
    ___ Make sure of the date, place, and time of the exam.
    ___ Make sure I receive the correct exam
    ___ Try to get a good night’s rest every night, but especially just before the exam.

Adapt this checklist for your own purpose. Any items which do not fit your particular learning style, which you may have tried and discarded, you can just cross off. Highlight ones you think are especially important for you. Post the list where you can refer to it frequently.
Exam-day Tips

Exam day has arrived and you are ready to face the challenge. Here’s the final checklist.

1. Be adequately prepared with pencils, pens, eraser, your student ID number, and a piece of identification with your photo on it (such as a driver’s license).

2. Make sure your name is on all pieces of the exam.

3. When you get your exam, read the directions very carefully and make sure that you understand what you are to do. If you are unsure, ask the supervisor.

4. Look over the entire exam. Be sure that you have it all.

5. Survey the exam and jot down any thoughts you have. These ideas can be useful when actually answering the questions.

6. Portion your time according to how much the different sections of the exam are worth. For example, if you have three hours and fifty percent of the grade is given for multiple choice questions and fifty percent for short answer questions, allot one and a half hours to each section.

7. First answer those items which you are sure of. These answers will come fast and you can gain a lot of confidence in an exam by first answering some questions which are easy for you. If you spend time puzzling over questions you aren’t sure of, you risk running out of time to answer questions to which you do know the answers.

8. Be sure you understand what a question is asking and that you have answered all parts of it. If the question says to explain something and give an example, do both. If it says give two examples of something, make sure you give two.

9. On multiple choice questions, try to decide what the correct answer is before you read the choices. Eliminate from the choices any tricky distractors and obviously incorrect answers. Then spend time deciding from what is left.

10. Never leave a question unanswered. If you do not know the answer, try to figure it out. Use other questions to find clues. Work from some of your other answers to try to recall the material or to think of what the answer might be. As a last resort, guess. On written answers, if you run out of time, write an outline of the answer and include the relevant information which you would incorporate into a written answer if you had the time.

11. Always check over an exam before handing it in. Check for careless mistakes and omissions.
12. Arrange for some reinforcement for yourself when the exam is over. Even though you will not know yet how well you did, you need some congratulations for doing the exam. Don’t just crawl back to your desk and resume studying, or worse, worry about whether you gave the right answers. Take a short break. Give yourself a pat on the back. Tell someone what you have done.

The probability of success on your exam is high:

- If you have a good understanding of the material,
- If your exam preparation has been thorough and diligent,
- If your exam-taking strategies and behaviours are appropriate and successful.

But what if you aren’t successful? Things do not always turn out the way we think they should. A failed exam is not the end of the world...  

What to Do When You Fail

When you fail an exam, it’s no time to fold up your books and quit. It is time, however, to take a good look at yourself and your study habits and determine why you failed. Sometimes it’s not easy. That’s why your university provides services that help.

This adult is an example of one student who couldn’t work things out for herself. She received a mark of 17 per cent on her final exam. The reason?

“There were lots of problems at home and it was really hard to concentrate. My daughter’s husband was beating her. She’s moved out now and has a place of her own. I was spending most of my time helping her, and was really worried about her. But things are straightened out now and I know I will not have any trouble on the supplemental.”

The student had a lot of trouble on the supplemental. She only received a mark of 25 per cent. The truth is she didn’t really know why she failed the first time, so she couldn’t develop an effective solution on her own. She couldn’t decide whether to take a break, continue on the assumption that things would change before the end of the contract, worry, quit, try harder, or call Student Counselling. She finally contacted her tutor who advised her to talk to a student counsellor. There she found a source of help with her real problem.

So if you experience exam difficulties and can’t sort out the reasons why, contact your tutor/instructor, or student counsellor. Someone can help you explore your options and direct you to an appropriate source of assistance.
Summary and Review

This exam module contains information and strategies to help you with the preparation and writing of exams. To help you summarize and review what you have learned, take a few minutes to answer these questions.

1. Were you aware of the difference between young people and adults in learning and performance?

   What are four factors which differentially influence learning and performance according to age?

2. How many of the items on the Exam Preparation Checklist are "old friends", or things you have always done?

   Which items are new to you?

3. Which, if any, are new strategies on the “Exam-day Tips”? 
Annotated Bibliography for Exams

The bibliography in this module comprises material related to student success through good exam preparation and strategies. Some of these materials repeat what this module has presented and some suggest alternative approaches.

The bibliography lists information on general study skills; how you can succeed, difficulties you may encounter in your studies and possible remedies for the difficulties. If you are encountering setbacks, or want to avoid encountering them, have a look at one or more of these books. They can help you define problems before you go on to the other modules. This list is only a sampling of the library holdings. If what you are interested in on this list is not available the librarian can help you find something similar.

There are additional good titles on the market so do not feel that you are limited to these books. If you have access to a library or you can go on-line on your computer, you can find out what books are available. Most bookstores have sections of reference or “self-help” books, and you might find it useful to browse through them.


While the chapter on exams is very short, it does refer you to many other sections of the book. The real value of this book is its wide range of topics. It is not recommended for individual study skills problems because the chapters are very brief. The book does, however, give a good overview of each topic.


In addition to chapters on specific study skills, this book includes chapters on memory and improving test taking skills. This is a serious approach to studying for the classroom student, but it is relevant for the adult independent learner as well. The material is presented primarily through activities, exercises and inventories, with few illustrations, and it is referenced and indexed.


You may be particularly interested in the chapters on test anxiety, which include an inventory, relaxation and why it is so important, and harnessing memory.


This book covers a wide range of topics aimed at success. Open-ended exercises, diagrams and cartoons help to make the content interesting and interactive. Included is a section on preparing for and writing exams.

This book has a special introduction for adult learners and covers just about every aspect of exam preparation and test taking, including sample questions.


This academic approach to thinking and learning includes chapters specifically aimed at different aspects of test taking. There are interactive exercises and illustrations, but no references.


This is a serious academic approach to study skills with plenty of examples and diagrams and a detailed table of contents, index and references. There are sections on preparing for and writing exams.


This Canadian edition has sections devoted to preparation and taking of tests. The material is presented through examples and is liberally sprinkled with photographs, drawings, and cartoons. The presentation is interactive, with plenty of exercises which encourage the reader to try out the ideas and concepts. Although the primary audience is the new university student just out of high school, it also addresses the adult, non traditional and independent student. It is indexed and includes references.


Aimed at the adult student, there are lots of exercises and open ended activities to break up the academic content of this book. There are chapters on preparing for and taking tests. It is laced with illustrations and cartoons, but has no references.


The chapters are layed out as courses, with the material presented separately from the exercises for developing skills, and with opening objectives and closing summaries. The presentation is serious, with no illustrations, cartoons, or references. There is a section on objective and essay testing.


Pauk has two good chapters on preparing for and taking exams with lots of examples of different types of questions and answers.


This book is part of the McGraw-Hill basic skills system kit. Raygor devotes three chapters to exams—preparing for and taking both objective and essay types.

Included in the extensive contents is a chapter on exams. Schumm is written for an adult audience and concentrates on presenting textual material along with inventories, exercises, and activities. It includes references for each chapter and has an extensive detailed table of contents and an index.


Among the specific study skills chapters is one on test taking strategies. The book is broken up by detailed headings, examples, diagrams, drawings, cartoons, and photographs. It includes references, a glossary, and an index.


This book presents techniques for studying which can help you get higher grades without losing sight of your main purpose in studying to learn. There are lots of examples and exercises with the answers explained. It addresses a variety of disciplines.


Included in this comprehensive book of study strategies are chapters on memory, exam strategies, and anxiety reduction. Two unique features of this book are its recognition of different skills for different disciplines, and a section on computers. The test is broken up with some examples and illustrations, and exercises, diagnostic inventories, and quizzes with the answers provided. It is referenced and indexed.


This is an excellent book which takes a positive, dynamic, optimistic approach to all aspects of being a student. It is written for the student in the classroom, but it is effective for any student. There are plenty of examples, exercises, and checklists to encourage active reading. The section on exam preparation and exam taking even includes how to answer questions to which you don’t think you know the answers.

Young, Arlene. *Coping with Exam Anxiety*. An Athabasca University Student Services publication based on Frank G. Richardson’s *Coping with Exam Anxiety*. Athabasca University, 1990.

Informational learning to help students cope better with exam taking. Exam anxiety is normal. The author presents information and techniques for reducing exam anxiety.