

UNIT 1: RETURNING TO STUDY

Making and Managing Time

Finding the time for study in the midst of an already busy life is a major concern for many who are studying part-time. A great deal obviously depends on your personal circumstances. You may be able (and indeed may be encouraged by senior colleagues) to integrate study into your work schedule. However, people juggling a variety of roles at home and at work, or with unsympathetic employers or families, may find that it is far hard to obtain regular, uninterrupted study time. It would be a good idea to set aside – to the extent possible - blocks of time on a regular basis for uninterrupted study, allowing for short, concentrated, regular bursts of study time. Your domestic/work situation will govern this and finding time may call for some careful negotiation.

It is important at the outset of post-graduate study to be realistic about the demands that you make on yourself. If you have a challenging job and a young family, it is probably not realistic to plan to do three hours of study every evening – unless of course you really are a night owl with exceptional energy. It is better to plan sensibly what you can achieve, and the length of time that your studies are likely to take, rather than having over-ambitious plans, and being racked with guilt every time you collapse exhausted in front of the television in the evening. When you are studying largely on your own, it is important to devise strategies that prevent you from becoming demoralised.

Our Master's degree programmes allow you a certain degree of flexibility, and therefore you should be able to tailor your workload to fit your circumstances. If you are to complete your studies successfully, it is important that you set your own goals, and try to stick to sensible schedules that you determine for yourself.

Effective Study

Once you do get some peace and quiet, you need to ensure that you make the best use of your study time. This may seem obvious, but it is surprising how even highly committed students can sometimes struggle with this. For example, a student once produced about sixty pages from one of the primary sources that he was using, all laboriously typed, with key passages highlighted in italics. Why, his tutor asked him, had he not photocopied the primary source, and used a highlighter pen for the key passages? He looked astonished at this suggestion, and admitted that he had been getting up at six in the morning for weeks on end in order to type the document into his computer. This, clearly, had not been a good use of his study time.

The art is to find shortcuts without cutting corners. Make photocopies of key material, and highlight and annotate them. Make concise notes, either on paper or on a computer, avoiding the temptation to write everything down (even experienced researchers can find this a challenge, particularly when using material of central importance to their

subject). The best thing may be to provide your own brief summaries of the author's argument, and the factual content of the material, together with accurately transcribed quotations that illustrate central points. Whatever method you adopt, you should make sure to note the full title and publication details of the source, together with the page references for all the material that you note. This is indispensable for subsequent citation and referencing in your essay or dissertation. There is nothing more frustrating than hunting through a large book for hours, in search of the page reference for that 'perfect' quote that you know is in there somewhere. Small 'Post-it Notes' are also useful for marking passages in books; you can write on them and they do not fall out of, or damage, the book.

You need to keep in mind *why* you are reading a particular book or article, and what you hope to gain from it. In most cases, the answer will probably be 'material for my essay or dissertation, and in particular, something on x ...'. As there are no exams for the Master's degrees (except for language modules) you do not have to worry about making notes to use for revision, which was probably a central task in your previous experience of study.

With any piece of research, there is a moment when you have to stop reading and start writing. Some people find this extremely unnerving, and it is vital not to become scared of the writing process. It is well known that some researchers become so engrossed in their research that they become less and less inclined to begin writing. It is best to start on some writing at an early stage, even if you suspect that what you have written is not quite right, and will need to be revised later.

It needs to be emphasised that although we hope to see presentation comparable to publishable standard in your written work, we do not necessarily expect the *content* to be up to that standard – though naturally we will be delighted if it is, and it will receive high marks. Most students find that their master's degree work starts at about the same level as their final year undergraduate work (usually an adequate standard to reach the pass mark of 40%) and that it improves as their knowledge and confidence increase. Please do not worry if you feel very rusty – once you start reading and writing, you may well find that your work is of a better quality than you initially feared.