THE

crowdsourced
guide
to
learning
DESIGN TIP

Only read the words highlighted in yellow for a summary of this guide.
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Introduction

In April 2015, FutureLearn invited people around the world to share their top study tips with us, to create The Crowdsourced Guide to Learning.

We asked them why they start and continue to learn; how they organise their study and remember what they've learnt; how they learn from and with other people; and what role learning plays in their lives.

We received hundreds of tips. Many were motivational, many were organisational and some were simply bizarre.

What we learnt is that while there are tried and tested methods for learning effectively, everyone has their own idiosyncrasies and habits that help them achieve their goals. So in this guide, we try to showcase both our favourite tips from learners and expert advice from the academic and online learning community.

Wherever you are on your learning journey, we hope you'll find something to inspire, inform or surprise.

Happy learning!
Foreword

PROFESSOR MIKE SHARPLES, THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

We learn by making connections. At the biological level, the connections are between neurons, which grow stronger whenever we have a new experience. At the mental level, the connections form between concepts, when we associate one idea with another by memorising, or by experiencing how objects and actions relate. And at the social level, the connections take the form of conversations, as we meet people and share ideas.

The surprising fact is that we don't need to push ourselves to make these connections - they come naturally. We can't help learning. We do it all the time, when we take in something new, or respond in a different way to people or surroundings. So why does learning often seem so hard?

Usually, it comes from trying to control that natural process, when we have to force ourselves to learn particular topics, such as revising for exams, or when we are told to learn specific facts and figures. The brain does not store items like a filing cabinet, so forcing ourselves to remember disconnected facts is not a natural way to learn.
Setting up the conditions to learn

We need to set up the conditions for making good connections. Usually, that means being relaxed and alert, so that our minds are focused on the immediate experience, setting achievable goals for ourselves, and being in a rich environment where there are plenty of opportunities to make relevant connections.

That could come from exploring a new city and meeting people, or from reading a good book or watching a stimulating video. For example, a good way to learn a foreign language (if you aren't able to live in the country or talk with native speakers) is not through trying to remember individual words, but by watching videos with subtitles. The more we enjoy the process of learning, the more we make rich and appropriate connections.

What makes us different to other animals is that not only do we react to the changing world around us, but we also seek out new opportunities for learning, then discuss what we learn with teachers and other learners. It's by holding conversations that we make the deeper and more abstract connections between concepts.
Conversing with ourselves

We hold conversations with ourselves, when we watch a video or read a text, then relate it to our previous knowledge and experience, finding new information, solving problems, and being confronted with different and challenging viewpoints.

Every time we say to ourselves “What does this mean?” or “Why are they saying this?” we are learning by reflective conversation. By thinking about what we have just learnt, focusing on what’s new and important, we are making the long-term links between the neurons that form our memories.

Conversing with others

We converse with teachers who have greater knowledge and experience and can share these in ways that connect with our own understanding. That can be difficult in a class when the teacher doesn't have the opportunity to match the knowledge to each person. That's why it seems like hard work to learn from a teacher or lecturer, because not only do we need to set up the right conditions for learning, but also make sense of information that doesn't always connect with
what we know and understand.

And most importantly, we learn by holding conversations with other people who can bring different but related perspectives. Having interesting discussions, either spoken or in writing, allows us to connect and understand at all levels - of facts, ideas and experiences.

**Learning in our own way**

Each of us has a unique way of learning. There is no universal "best" learning method, but generally we learn well when we set our own goals; make active choices about what we do and don't want to learn; and think about what we have just learnt and relate it to our knowledge.

Most importantly, we learn well when we share and enjoy the experience!
WHY

do you

learn
The more courses I take and the more I learn, the hungrier I feel for more knowledge... it's like training yourself to be curious.
Why do you learn?

If you think of learning as a means to an end - a simple stepping stone from school to university to work to better paid work - then we hope you'll think again when you read this chapter.

The tips here show that learning for learning's sake is a rewarding experience. And once you start learning, it's difficult to stop. The trick is to choose a subject that you really care about; know what you want to achieve; and have something or someone to inspire you.
IN THE MIDDLE OF DIFFICULTY LIES OPPORTUNITY

QUOTE BY ALBERT EINSTEIN, PHYSICIST. SUBMITTED BY BLAIR BROWN
GO WITH YOUR INSTINCT

DARE TO THINK YOU MIGHT

“Go with your instinct and take the plunge in learning something new. The sheer enjoyment cannot be underestimated.” Submitted by Gina Wild.

“If you don’t dare to think you might lose your whole voice.” Quote by Jeryn Pockett.

“Submit by Jon Slack.”
NEVER DOUBT YOUR GOAL

The Olympian Michael Johnson is an amazing role model - he never misses a day’s training, is on the track on cold rainy days and never doubts his goal.

SUBMITTED BY MANISHA PARMAR

DON’T GIVE UP

Remember: "If at first you don’t succeed, you’re running about average." Not everything is achievable the first time.

SUBMITTED BY RONALD LOCKLEY
FIRST & FOREMOST
HAVE FUN

When you enjoy your work, information is digested with relative ease and it ceases to be "work." Instead, it's more of an excursion into a mysterious world, which captures your imagination.

SUBMITTED BY ANTHONY CLARK

It is pointless to try to study if it is not fun, it then becomes a chore. At that point, you will either hate your studies or become afraid of them.

SUBMITTED BY RONALD LOCKLEY
EXPERT COMMENT

When starting out on a new course, understanding why you are learning is important. It isn’t necessary to tackle all learning in the same way. Instead, you need to fit the learning to you, not you to the learning:

If you want to gain a single skill, once you have got that skill, you can decide to continue or not.

If you are learning for fun, and you find some of the experience is not enjoyable, skip that bit.

If you have limited time, work out what is the absolute minimum you need to do and skip the optional bits.

If you want (or need) the certificate, you will probably need to spend extra time to understand everything.

PROFESSOR SHIRLEY WILLIAMS, UNIVERSITY OF READING
How do you organise your learning?
"Time is what we want most but what we use worst"

QUOTE BY WILLIAM PENN, FOUNDER OF PENNSYLVANIA.
SUBMITTED BY REBECCA
How do you organise your learning?

When William Penn uttered the words across the page in 1692, status updates and cat memes were yet to be invented, and even books were in short supply. Yet in between shaping the development of early America, Penn clearly still managed to fritter away his time.

His words remind us that procrastination and disorganisation are age-old enemies. And if we're to learn effectively, we must overcome them. So in this chapter, we offer tips on how to plan your learning, find the right time and place, and not get distracted.

And if you manage that, reward awaits...
Revising in pyjamas sounds like a lovely idea, but I find getting up and dressed, and washing my face makes me feel awake and prepared. Therefore the day is much more productive.

SUBMITTED BY JESS

Before I sleep, when I lay on the bed in the dark, I try to remember what I learnt that day. I also do that when I wake up in the morning.

SUBMITTED BY BE THANH TUYEN

In the afternoon, I take a siesta - it sharpens the mind.

SUBMITTED BY SYLVA SIMSOVA

Taking short breaks will restore your mental energy. During those breaks drink plenty of water and juice, and eat fruit to get energy and refresh your brain.

SUBMITTED BY REENA MITTAL
Cafés are nice and cozy, but if you are an observer, it is easy to become distracted. Understand what you need and find your proper place.

SUBMITTED BY JESSICA GRANT

Choose a place to always study, where you can really concentrate. It will make you have more focus because if you are there, you know that you have to study.

SUBMITTED BY ANA

I make sure that I have everything I need to hand - iPad, phone, paper, pen, pencil, eraser, sharpener, books, previous notes, glasses, tissues and water bottle. I go through a sort of ritual, getting everything ready. The preparation settles my mind into thinking.

SUBMITTED BY DENISE BOND
Schedule a chunk of time every week to learn and focus wholly on that. A lunchtime, an early morning session, or curled up in the evenings. Make it regular, make it consistent, make it count.

SUBMITTED BY AUROREANCHRIS

Don’t waste your time with distractions, mainly on the internet. Don’t open your social media accounts. Set a time limit for tasks.

SUBMITTED BY REBECCA

Find short spells to study. 30 minutes to an hour is quite enough for me, usually after I have checked my emails first thing in the morning, when my mind has not been cluttered by other things.

SUBMITTED BY AVRIL
After having a hard time understanding something or not finding solution, a ten-minute break helps me to continue with better effort and better understanding. Just let go and forget about study for those ten short minutes.

SUBMITTED BY A-IDONTKKNOW

EXPERT COMMENT

Being well-prepared is the most important way to improve your experience of learning.

Prepare mentally, by setting yourself goals you can achieve, and then checking how you are performing as the course progresses. Prepare physically, if you can, by finding a calm and satisfying place and time to study, with your own kit such as pen and paper for taking notes. And prepare socially, by making space in your life away from the distractions of email and messages.

If you can do all that, then reward yourself! If that’s not possible in your crowded and busy life, then recognise this and wait for the opportunity.

PROFESSOR MIKE SHARPLES, THE OPEN UNIVERSITY
Which techniques help you learn?
“It doesn't matter if the recipient of your question is older or younger than you. If they know and you don't, then they are the scholar and you are the learner.”
Which techniques help you learn?

In this chapter, we get into the nitty-gritty of learning, with some tips, techniques and tactics to try. Some are universal - like the importance of asking questions, which Lorena points out opposite. Others are more personal - they're ideas for you to test out.

Note taking is a great example. It's a theme that crops up in learners' tips a lot, but every learner has their own way of doing it - with mnemonics or drawings, in notebooks or on flashcards. So give these tips a go and see which ones work for you.
Listen carefully
The best way to learn is to listen. Listen so carefully and attentively that you are able to grasp every word.
SUBMITTED BY ANJALI

Read curiously
The key word is curiosity. If you try to learn what you are curious about, chances are you will remember what you read much more easily and quickly.
SUBMITTED BY ANA MARIA ABELLA

Think critically
The sharing of different opinions, theories or queries can help to develop a deeper critical thinking around the subject.
SUBMITTED BY TRACIE M

Question fearlessly
Never, ever, be afraid to ask questions. There is no such thing as a silly question, and you will often find that several other people have been pondering the same thing. This in itself gives you confidence.
SUBMITTED BY DAWN CRANIE

Note actively
Making notes, writing things in a notebook, is not in itself knowledge. You have to think actively, work, make connections and remember, in order to put it in your head. Only then is it something closer to knowledge.
SUBMITTED BY DON
Map mindfully
Mind maps are the best tool that I ever learnt to use. A great way to start off a new piece of writing, to generate ideas or to prepare for an exam.

SUBMITTED BY ANIKA VED

Remember regularly
Once you have your subject matter written down on a flashcard, read it over and over, have a 30-minute break and without looking at the card, try to reproduce it.

SUBMITTED BY PAUL

Reflect personally
My tip would be to ensure that you take time to reflect on what you are learning. How does it relate to you? How can it make your life better?

SUBMITTED BY ALISON GRANGE

Explain verbally
For me, the best way to establish whether or not I’ve grasped what I’ve just studied is to verbalise it - either to the four walls or to my long-suffering husband.

SUBMITTED BY ALISON MCKENNA

Log thoroughly
I write up a learning log on what I learnt; what the value of the learning was to me and my job; why it was valuable; what else I need to learn in support; and where I will find the learning, with references and URLs.

SUBMITTED BY DAVE YOUNG
For organising information, a great technique is to create a structured outline of what you are learning. The focus should not be on writing down each detail, but rather using indenting and grouping, to visually organise the different concepts.

A technique to help with synthesis is to pause between each major module of the course and to write down the three most important points you learnt in the module. This can be entirely personal, it is for you to reflect on and summarise.

A technique to help with application is to take something you’ve learnt and apply it to a novel example from outside of the course. Take a moment to think about how well your example works or doesn’t work, and then post it in the discussion board and ask your peers what they think.
One of the best ways to check you understand something is to explain it to someone else. So imagine you need to teach someone else the material you have just been learning. Perhaps you could find a friend or fellow learner who would be willing to listen and collaborate with you. See if you can teach them the subject you have been learning. Encourage them to ask questions. Discuss the materials together. Explaining something to someone else can often increase your learning too.

DR KATHERINE STEVENS, THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD
How do you learn with others?
“Discuss your knowledge with others to learn new things.”
How do you learn with others?

In the foreword, we discussed the vital role conversation plays in learning. While conversation with yourself is important, conversation with others is better. And in our age of online learning, we have more and more ways to discuss our ideas with other people.

In this chapter, the tips all share a common message: "You get out what you put in." **Don't just be a bystander** - join the conversation. And don't just learn from other people - once you discover something, pass it on. Explaining what you've learnt is one of the best ways to remember.
I learn best by discussing a topic, usually with someone who knows more about it than me. Joining a class helps me more than reading does.

SUBMITTED BY AMAN

I find peer discussion groups helpful - questions can be explored, worries shared and strategies agreed.

SUBMITTED BY TRACIE M

If a discussion forum seems daunting for the first timers, we have all been there. Just join in. There isn't anything to be worried about. Trust me, I was one of the most timid people on the planet. And now I thoroughly enjoy joining in the discussions.

SUBMITTED BY CAROLYN URQUHART

EXPERT COMMENT

We can all benefit from sharing our "stories" with other learners from a wide range of backgrounds and from all over the world. Interacting with others, sharing our experiences and building our networks are central means of learning on (and beyond) the course itself.

DR LISA HARRIS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON
If you're taking an online course, organise a MOOC meetup to learn together with others. It's an amazing experience, it helps you to dig deeper and look further.

SUBMITTED BY ARJAN TUPAN

EXPERT COMMENT

Forming a peer study group is one way of keeping the motivation going. You could form a course club offline, and arrange a regular time to meet up or chat. If possible, connect with people in the local area doing the same course, and you could arrange to meet socially at regular intervals (in a coffee shop, for instance) to motivate each other.

DR MOMNA HEJMADI, UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Teach part of what you have learnt to others and make notes. Processing the study material further will help you to understand and retain information better.

SUBMITTED BY TARANNUM

Try to teach or communicate what you want to learn, even if not fully understood, to someone else or a group of others - they will learn from you, and you will learn by the transmission of your own understanding.

SUBMITTED BY PETER WHITELEY
WHAT keeps you motivated to learn?
Learning gives knowledge, knowledge gives confidence, confidence gives character, and character creates a person.
What keeps you motivated to learn?

So far we've looked at how to organise your learning, some useful tips for studying and the importance of conversing with others. But what happens when you hit the wall? When you get bored, it gets too hard or you lose your confidence?

In this chapter, we offer up some advice for turning those conversations into supportive relationships; remembering why you started learning in the first place; and reflecting on just how far you've come.
Get support and ask for help

Establish a good relationship with the teacher and other students. This can help keep you motivated and improve your confidence.

SUBMITTED BY AY DAMIRAH

If the problem is the understanding or the difficulty of the work, please please please, do ask for help from your tutor or co-learners without embarrassment. You are a student and that implies that you are not expected to know that which you strive to learn.

SUBMITTED BY EMMA

Don't be scared to have fun

Play. Just as children play with toys, play with statistics, literature, geometry, topology, networks, or any other topic; this frees you from an unconscious fear of failure.

SUBMITTED BY JEREMY LEE

The better the engine, the more efficient my learning is. If spiced with additional motivation, like planning trips or jobs, the result is absolutely great. The learning is fast, pleasant and practically non-stop!

SUBMITTED BY HALYNA BORTAKOVA
Reflect on what you've learnt

Students working on their own need some self-awareness, some way of keeping an internal monitor on their approach. Ask yourself: "Why do I think that? Why do I feel like that about this area of history or thought? If I always judge X adversely, why? Do I have real grounds?" It is all summed up in a single question: "Where did what is in my mind come from?"

SUBMITTED BY PAMELA COREN

Studying new subjects is like going to the gym. It improves your overall feeling of wellbeing and also your mental health. Learning will make you think about the world differently.

SUBMITTED BY ABDELLATIF BOUHID

EXPERT COMMENT

The key thing is to have a real interest for the subject area - choose something that you find really interesting.

The next step is to keep up with your enthusiasm throughout the course - and to put time aside in your busy schedule. Note that you don't need to read everything - if you don't have the time, be selective and don't worry if you miss some information.

Finally, don't be scared or nervous to share your opinion - you'll find it motivating to have people responding to or agreeing with your comments.

DR EMMA EMANUELSSON PATTERSON, UNIVERSITY OF BATH
WHAT
makes you a FutureLearner
?
"For me, learning is for life."
What makes you a FutureLearner?

At FutureLearn, we like to call the millions of people who take free online courses with us "FutureLearners." But this isn't just a synonym for "users" - it's a state of mind.

We know that every FutureLearner loves learning for learning's sake. They're juggling professional and personal commitments just to discover something new. And whether they're 13 or 93, they know there will always be something new out there for them to learn.

In this chapter, we discover what makes a learner a FutureLearner.
I WANT TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD

It may sound simple, but it is basically my curiosity and the need to understand, as best as I can, the world that surrounds me.

SUBMITTED BY LUISA GONZÁLEZ PINTO

Learning different things is a good way to understand the world. People, especially young people, should try to study all kinds of interesting things they’re really interested in according to their own personality.

SUBMITTED BY RADU LAURA
I GET JOY FROM LEARNING NEW THINGS

If something excites you, everything you read, you watch or you write, will be a learning experience that you love.

SUBMITTED BY PEIO

Why do I study? Well, simply for the joy of learning something new. I have a passion for education. As a language teacher of many years, I have seen first hand what learning can do for people, it raises their expectations and raises their self-esteem.

SUBMITTED BY SUE ETHERINGTON
MY BRAIN IS A MUSCLE THAT NEEDS TO BE FLEXED

I am a keen sportsman and enjoy being fit. I use this as a motivating factor. I think of my brain as a muscle that needs to be exercised. I would not let my physical self become unfit and so I apply the same philosophy to my work. Train hard, get results. Work hard, get results. I apply the same discipline from my sports life to my work life.

SUBMITTED BY GARY ABRAHAMS

For me, thinking is as important to my wellbeing as physical exercise and courses are a bit like the exercise bike down at the gym. I can sit down at the computer, concentrate for an hour or so, usually first thing in the morning, and then go off and do other stuff, feeling that I have done something useful.

SUBMITTED BY KEITH MUIR
I'LL NEVER BE TOO OLD TO LEARN

I am still learning from my own grandchildren as I'm curious about the skills they have, and keep asking them to teach me some of those.

SUBMITTED BY NASREEN AHSAN

Remember that you are never too old to study and that by doing so, you will gain a better understanding of the world around you. Its wide range of cultural differences will begin to make sense.

SUBMITTED BY SUE CAMPBELL
The famous Danish philosopher Grundtvig once said: "Man has not lived, before he learns about the things he once did not appreciate." Although this is an extreme statement, I think that there is a lot of wisdom to it. If we learn to see life from other viewpoints, experience issues that others are facing, and enhance our lives by increasing our knowledge and skills, then many of us will grow as people, and we might learn to see opportunities in diversity and difference.
WHO contributed?
Thanks to everyone who submitted a tip
Mary Schaeffer
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We couldn’t include everyone’s advice here, but you can check out all of the tips and submit your own at:

[learning-guide.futurelearn.com]