



Study competence

A GUIDE SUPPORTING YOU IN YOUR STUDIES

- Self-leadership
- Time management
- To read and prepare for an exam
- Course diaries – a tool for reflection
- Portfolio

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Self-leadership

ON OUR COURSES AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY, WE PROCEED FROM AN EDUCATIONAL BELIEF WHERE THE STUDENT'S OWN RESPONSIBILITY IS ESSENTIAL.

University studies are largely about self-studying and self-leadership. The student is expected to be target-oriented and active. By self-leadership, we mean the leadership we exercise on ourselves. In order to succeed, we need some specific skills.

According to Nicolas Jacquemot in the Swedish book "Self-leadership. The art of finding your way in life and at the workplace", (freely translated from "Självledarskap. Konsten att hitta rätt i livet och på jobbet"), there are seven important parts in self-leadership: self-knowledge, self-control, motivation, focus, stress management, persistence and self-reward.

Next, you will find a short presentation of all seven parts:

Self-knowledge

Jacquemot writes that getting to know oneself is fundamental for anyone who wants to develop their self-knowledge; to be aware of our strengths, values and motives. Only after this, we can set goals for what we want to achieve and use different tools to reach them.

Self-control

Everyone has the ability for self-control, and everyone can train it. Self-control is needed, so that we can lead ourselves and go forward. It is also important in order to avoid letting feelings and impulses control our actions, when things temporarily feel difficult or boring. Or when we are tempted by short term rewards, instead of striving for what is best for us in the long run.

Motivation

Motivation is an important key to our actions, and it is the fuel itself in self-leadership. We can become better at becoming motivated and even at keeping the motivation, by identifying things that motivate us, as well as identifying what obstacles there are.

Focus

Focus is important for self-leadership in order to identify what we should be doing and to be able to prioritize, among other things. We also need focus in order to begin different tasks and to finish them. We can train our ability to control our focus.

Stress management

When the demands we are subjected to exceed our ability to manage them, stress develops. This happens both at work and in studies, as well as in relationships. Certain stress is good and can help us focus, as we sharpen our senses and mobilise the energy that we need to succeed at a task. Other stress is only negative. Being able to cope with stress is an important ingredient in self-leadership.

Persistence

To give up one's goals, put a project aside or not to complete a commenced task are common consequences of flaws in self-leadership. We need perseverance and endurance, so that we can lead ourselves forward through life and be able to overcome temporary obstacles, along with coping with major adversity.

Self-reward

Paying attention to and rewarding oneself is also an essential part of self-leadership. It is important to enjoy the achieved efforts. Too often, we spend plenty of time thinking about what we did wrong and pay only little attention to what we did right.

Source: Jacquemot, Nicolas (2018) Självledarskap. Konsten att hitta rätt i livet och på jobbet. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur

Two other tools or characteristics that contribute to success in self-leadership are self-compassion and grit.

Self-compassion

Occupational Health Psychologist Ronnie Grandell emphasizes the importance of self-compassion. Self-compassion means that I treat myself with the same warmth, understanding and helpfulness that I would use towards a good friend. He means that our attitude towards ourselves can be very critical and dismissive in the exact moments where we would need self-compassion the most. When the workload is piling up and a deadline is looming, an accusing voice often appears. In this moment, it is important to show oneself self-compassion – an ability that we also can train.

Source: Grandell, Ronnie (2015): Itsemyötätunto. Helsinki: Tammi

Grit

When it comes to persistence, the researcher in psychology Angela Duckworth has identified grit as a crucial quality that has a significant impact on whether we succeed at a task. Grit means to have passion and perseverance. A person who has grit can work persistently to achieve long-term goals. Duckworth identifies a few factors that indirectly are connected to grit: interest, training, goals and hope.

Source: Duckworth Angela: Grit (2017): Konsten att inte ge upp. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.

Dynamic mindset

The newest research also emphasizes the experience of your own ability to achieve success. If you have a dynamic mindset (contrary to a static one), you think that abilities and achievements can be influenced by new knowledge and experiences. You then believe that you can improve, and that practise and training can make a difference.

Among other factors that affect the study success, time management is a key factor according to research. The students who succeed in planning their studies well, are also happier with their studies and feel more motivated and vice versa.

[Here you can see a short film where the ÅAU's study psychologist tells about the importance of taking care of yourself. The link opens in Stream. The video is in Swedish, but has English subtitles. ÅAU-login required.](#)

[The ÅAU's study psychologist has also made a film about how you can handle a lack of motivation. He says that motivation is for amateurs. The link opens in Stream. The video is in Swedish, but has English subtitles. ÅAU-login required.](#)



Picture: Unsplash/Markus Spiske

Time management

STRESS IS SELDOM A LACK OF TIME, BUT AN
UNCLEAR PERCEPTION OF WHAT NEEDS TO
BE DONE AND HOW.

ANNA TEBELIUS BODIN

It is possible to combine university studies with work, family and hobbies, but you need to reserve enough time for studying, as well as create a study plan. Apart from lectures, group work or online discussions, you also need time to read the course material to be able to write various shorter and longer texts. To get hold of course literature may also take time – not all the books are at the library and sometimes you need to request a book from another library through interlibrary lending, and so on.

Planning your studies gives you some routines and creates structure. It is especially beneficial to create a time plan if you participate in several courses at the same time or if you do not have much time for studies.

Creating a study plan for your studies

If creating a study plan feels overwhelming and you do not know where to start, you can use something called microproductivity. In short, it means breaking down a bigger goal into smaller steps. To rather take small steps forward, than trying to take giant steps.

[The article *What's Microproductivity? The Small Habit That Will Lead You To Big Wins* behind this link](#) is easy to read and gives an overview and some tips about what you could think about when focusing on a goal.

A big part of studying consists of self-studies; articles to read, maybe online lectures, course literature. You need to make room for all of this. One way could be to book time for self-studies in your calendar, the same way you book other activities and deadlines.

From the engineering world comes a concept called "reversed engineering". It means starting from the goal, which for example can be a deadline for a task. Next, you go back in time and measure how much time you need, in order to be able to carry out the task. If the deadline is on a Sunday, you might need to start the previous week on Saturday and read about the subject and start writing, for it to be ready a week later.

Writing down the study plan makes it clearer than a plan that you only built in your mind. A plan that you wrote down is in a tangible form, which is easy to follow up. Writing also helps you to picture how much time each task actually takes.

Your study plan can for example look as follows:

- Pinpoint the main goal for your studies and relate it to the other goals in your life.
- Divide the main goal into sub-goals. Remember the microproductivity!
- Build a timeline for the sub-goals; consider both your life situation and your individual study situation.
- Develop a detailed study plan for every week and for every day. It should still have room for unexpected events.
- Follow your study plan and use the time efficiently that you have reserved for studies. Try the Pomodoro technique! You will find a short description of it a little further down.

- Regularly evaluate and analyse your studies, in what ways you have succeeded or failed.
- Adjust your plan and time frame if needed but stick to your main goal.
- Keep in mind that a course with five ECTS credits requires working around 135 hours.
- For a study unit of 25 ECTS credits, a work effort of approximately 675 hours is required.

As you plan, remember the following:

Your quality time. What time of the day do you work best? When is your level of concentration and activity at its best?

Your ability to concentrate. How long can you study in one go? What kind of environment is best for your concentration? Do you want it to be quiet around you or are you able to concentrate better while listening to music? Do you work better at home or at the library? Also note that the ability to concentrate varies and that short breaks are needed regularly.

Set realistic goals. Avoid underestimating or overestimating yourself. Do not compare yourself with others, because your goals should be adapted to your own personal resources. Stress is often caused by too high expectations that are not possible to handle within the time frame. That is why realistic time planning many times is about clearly postponing a specific task for a later time.

Surprises require extra time. The plan is at its best when it also allows flexibility and is connected to the rest of your life and the possible surprises life sometimes throws at you. For example, not being able to borrow a book for an exam on time, an old friend suddenly wanting to meet up, you getting sick or a loved one needing your help. When the situation changes, you can try to hold on to the most important task in the plan and change the time frame for less important tasks that can wait and be done later.

Self-compassion and thanking yourself. Sometimes things do not go according to plan. When that happens, it is important to have compassion for oneself. Do not give up but accept the situation and assess whether the plan needs to be adjusted. It is also important to celebrate the goals you reach. Reward yourself when you reach the goal within your planned time frame.

[Here you can see a short film where the ÅAU study psychologist talks about formulating good goals. The film is in Swedish, but has English subtitles. ÅAU-login required.](#)



Picture: Unsplash/Rachel Lynette French

Useful tools for planning and managing your time

Listing the tasks

A good and easy tool for time management is writing lists, where you put down the tasks for the week or day. Certain tasks and projects can feel big and unclear – start by dividing the task into smaller tasks, so called sub-goals. Be as precise as possible. Do not only write that you are going to “study subject x”, instead write “reading for an hour” or “reading 30 pages in book x” and so on.

Follow up and cross off every small task you have done – this gives you the feeling of having accomplished something and being rid of something. Reward yourself after finishing some tasks.

Make a circle of your day

If you would like a visual idea of how much time you spend on different activities, why not try drawing a big circle that equals one day. Then fill out how many hours you spend doing different activities during one day. Include sleep, food, Netflix, exercising, socialising and so on. Where can you fit your studies? In order to have time for your studies you might have to leave out something else. Do you need to look at your priorities? Skipping your sleep is never a good idea and only leads to you having less energy.

Prioritizing among your tasks

Personal effectiveness means doing the right things and choosing among the tasks you need to do; how fast different things need to be done and how important different tasks are. This is connected for example to deadlines and the significance the results have for you or how you benefit from them. Prioritize both in the long term and for the day. Write the most important tasks on the top of the day's list. Prioritizing means leaving something out!

Personal productivity means doing the things the right way. You do this by developing good routines and systems which facilitate everyday life, for example by scheduling the work in your calendar. Plan and write down every working moment as precise as possible. You are the best judge as to how detailed you need to be – develop your own system for calendar notes. Use coloured pens, post it-notes – basically any system as long as it works for you. It is not enough for you to only note the deadline – at that point the work already needs to be done!

Start immediately – do not procrastinate!

Not finishing tasks within the set timeline is too often caused by the tendency to procrastinate. You postpone tasks to the next day, after convincing yourself that you do not have enough time today. You immediately follow any impulse to go and do something more "fun" or wait for a better moment to do what you must do. Sometimes we do not have much time and do not even begin doing a task because we think there is not enough time to make progress. But already in fifteen minutes or half an hour you will make progress. To read notes or revise something does not have to take long.

One way to get started can be trying the Pomodoro technique. You set the timer on your phone to 25 minutes and decide that during that time you should carry out a specific task. You can get surprisingly much done in 25 minutes when you are focused.

You can also [try using the online tool Pomodoro tracker](#).

[Read more about Pomodoro here](#).

[Here you can see a short film with ÅAU's study psychologist telling about Pomodoro. The link opens in Stream and the video is in Swedish with English subtitles. ÅAU-login required.](#)

Watch the Youtube video [Time Management Strategies To End Procrastination](#) by Practical Inspiration for tips on time management.

Life does not always go according to plan and there is a possibility that your plan does not work. If you – despite good planning – are feeling constantly overwhelmed by undone tasks, stress and being double booked, it could be a good idea to take a step back and evaluate where it went wrong and what can be done instead. Evaluating your time planning now and then is useful in order to see where the planning has been unrealistic and in which cases you have difficulty estimating the amount of time needed.

Self-leadership and time management are important in order for you to follow through with the activities that you have set out to do.

[Here you can see a short film where ÅAU's study psychologist gives tips about better planning. The film is in Swedish with English subtitles and the link opens in Stream. ÅAU-login required.](#)

[In this short film the study psychologist tells about procrastination. The link opens in Stream. The film is in Swedish with English subtitles. ÅAU-login required.](#)



Picture: Unsplash/Sharon McCutcheon

Studying and preparing for an exam

WHEN IT COMES TO STUDYING FOR AN EXAM OR READING LITERATURE, THERE IS NOT ONLY ONE RIGHT WAY OF LEARNIN. WHAT METOD WORKS BEST VARIES FROM PERSON TO PERSON.

Preparing for an exam takes time. It requires effective learning strategies for the student to be able to pick out the essential information from the literature.

Four quick tips for studying for an exam:

- 1) Underline the most important information.
- 2) Write down the most important points and key words or draw pictures/schemes, which help you remember.
- 3) Focus on the larger whole and on understanding what you are reading. You need to understand the context and to be able to create a comprehensive picture of the course of events and the arguments.

- 4) Do not forget to practise! It is easier to remember if you actively process what you hear and read, as well as practise.

Reading scientific literature

Reading scientific literature makes up a significant part of your studies. Scientific books and articles within each scientific branch use a different language. Acquiring the specific language is a part of the learning process.

Reading should develop your thinking, bring out new ideas and new facts. It should expand your worldview and build new knowledge. Reading always requires adapting your knowledge. The more knowledge you have and the better structured it is, the faster you read and the better you become at picking out the essential information from the text and creating a meaningful whole.

Reading literature for an exam

- Start by eyeing through the book to create an understanding of the content. Familiarize yourself with the foreword, contents, introduction, final words and conclusion. Also activate your previous knowledge about the subject.
- Then read through the book thoroughly. Process the facts in as many ways as possible, connecting them to your previous knowledge. The most important content in a chapter can usually be deduced from the heading. Use the headings to create questions for yourself. Do not ignore tables and diagrams; they are often used to present and illustrate central facts.
- After this, revise the central content in the book to make sure that you master the material. The more you need to read, the more important it is to revise the material in order to acquire the knowledge and be able to recall it. Practising to write answers for an exam is also a good way to structure the content.

Literature in a foreign language

Studies at the university often entail reading books in foreign languages. It can be good to develop your vocabulary by the help of different handbooks and to train your mechanical reading speed. In general, there is no difference between reading a text in a foreign language or in your mother tongue.

- Create an **overall picture** of the content.
- Identify the **concepts** and **keywords** which are important for the whole.

- Look up the meaning of the words that you need in order to understand the text.

You do not need to understand every word when reading literature in a foreign language. Looking up many words in the dictionary easily slows down the reading and makes it difficult. Long and complicated sentences might also cause problems. A long sentence often becomes easier to read if you identify the most important parts in it: the subject, the predicate and the object. Thus, ask yourself: "Who does what?"

The SQ3R method

SQ3R has been developed for reading difficult texts. First, **skim** through the text to get an idea of it. Then, formulate the **questions** that are answered by the text. Try to find the answers while **reading** through the text. After reading, try to **recall** the main points of for example each paragraph or chapter. Finally, skim through the text again and **review** the essential parts of the text and finish with a mental picture of the whole.

Preparing for an exam

- Acquire the literature for the exam on time and reserve enough time to read through the books. If you have time to study for a couple of hours per day, it will take you around ten days to read and review a 200-page book. This also depends on your reading speed and the previous knowledge that you have.
- When preparing for an exam, you should read and review the literature, as well as your notes from the lectures. You would also benefit from talking with other students about possible doubts.
- The evenings before the exam should be reserved for reviewing. Also remember to check and review the material after the exam. That is the most efficient way of learning.
- You can relieve the stress for the exam by preparing well and familiarize yourself with the practical arrangements surrounding the exam. Do you need to register in advance? How long does the exam take? How many and what kind of questions are there? How should they be answered? After the first examination you will know more about the exam in practise and it will be easier to prepare for the next exam.
- A good rule is to prioritize good sleep the night prior to the exam, rather than to read until the morning.
- Calm yourself and concentrate before the exam.

What you need to think about before writing an exam

- An exam is also a learning situation, so it might be good to read through all the questions before you start writing. That way, you have an understanding about the contents of the exam. Do not forget to calculate your time usage, so that you have enough time to answer all the questions. Answering an essay question takes at least 20-30 minutes.
- Before you start answering a question, think through what you know and delimit your answer, so that it answers the specific question. You can also write an outline before writing the actual answer or use a mind map.



Picture: Unsplash/Nick Morrison

Course diaries – a tool for reflection

REFLECTION IS A PART OF THE LEARNING PROCESS AND MEANS CRITICAL THINKING. THIS INCLUDES CONSIDERING QUESTIONS FROM MANY POINTS OF VIEW TO CREATE A NUANCED WHOLE.

The course diary, or learning diary, is a report of what you learn, and it works as course material, which has been written by you in your own words.

Write the text for your own benefit.

If there are difficult questions or things you do not understand or agree with – discuss these in the diary. Note that the course diary is not a summary of the lecture and the discussions, but it can, in contrast, contain support questions which give structure to your writing. The course diary is a follow-up of your studies. It therefore needs to be

written while you have the impressions still fresh in your mind – not in the last second before deadline.

You do not need to write every day in your diary. It is sufficient to write some after every learning situation or at least every week. It may be long comments, but it is also enough to write down a few thoughts each week. It does not need to take longer than 10-15 minutes to write. The course diary can replace a traditional exam or be part of an alternative form of examination. The diary can also be written as a blog.

Tips for questions you can use for a course diary:

What do you know about the subject from before?

- What things about the subject make you curious?
- What is your attitude towards learning new things about the subject?
- What are your own experiences regarding this subject?

In the course diary you can try to answer for example the following questions:

- Do you have a different opinion about what you have learnt?
- How has the subject been approached in the media or other places lately?
- Where can you find more information regarding the subject?
- What has been the most important thing you have learnt during the lectures/course?
- Is there something you do not understand?
- What questions did the subject raise?
- What would you like to ask the teacher?

After a lecture you can think about the following questions in your course diary:

- What did you learn today?
- What feelings arose during the lecture?
- What made you surprised?
- In what way did you participate in the teaching?
- Could you improve your way of learning?
- Would you like to continue studying the subject? Why?

Source: globalikoulu.net



Picture: Unsplash/William Iven

Portfolio

THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE PORTFOLIO IS THE STUDENT'S OWN ESTIMATION OF HIS OR HER WORK.

A portfolio is a tool for learning and evaluation. It is a tangible collection of study work, texts or products, which represents the student's knowledge in a versatile and expedient manner. The portfolio is produced and compiled by the student oneself during the studies.

A portfolio can be created in many ways: like a binder, a box, a notebook, an online portfolio, a video or a sound recording. The content and purpose of usage determine the format and the scope of it.

Apart from the student's self-evaluation of his or her work, a good portfolio also contains for example the teacher's and the fellow students' viewpoints and evaluation.

The portfolio fosters self-directed learning and gives the ability to:

- analyse, sort out and define goals
- plan one's studies, study assignments and work methods
- seek information in a self-directed manner
- evaluate one's own work, success and results as well as the whole learning process

[Lastly, a direct link to Stream where you find all the films made by ÅAU study psychologist Daniel Ventus. ÅAU-login required.](#)



www.abo.fi/opu