

Ten Pieces of Advice to Work Independently During University Studies

During your university studies, you have a lot of freedom; this requires goal-oriented and independent work. Whether it is about writing papers, holding a presentation or preparing for exams – you will need high motivation, endurance and organizational talent. Since this is not always easy, one can easily develop work-difficulties. In this guideline, you will receive some specific tips and pointers to achieve a structured working style.

1. Accept the Work

View your studies as a type of work. Even the most interesting job is no fun over long stretches but will lead to a deeper satisfaction on the long-run. Accept the hurdles, the dry spells and the disappointments. It is helpful to organize your studies like any other job and to achieve a “work-mentality”, for example by strictly separating studies and leisure time (see below). The goal is to develop a pragmatic daily routine during your studies.

2. Develop a Ritual

Work during your studies should be scheduled professionally. For this, it is helpful to separate working hours from everyday rituals and leisure time (see below) strictly. Setting everyday rituals (getting up on time, a fixed time to start work, scheduled breaks, a set time to end work) will relieve you from constantly ruminating and non-productive decision making. Especially in times of stress it is also important not to abstain from usual activities like sports, cultural events and socializing with friends. Do not make a drama out of your independent work but a professional everyday situation.

3. Choosing a Proper Workspace

Your workspace should be separated from your private space, as it would be if it were at a professional occupation. Try to study and work outside your apartment/dorm. An alternative might be the library where you could study in peace and without disturbances, and where you would meet other people who are working. This can cause a feeling of solidarity and can be very motivating. Studying outside your home also prevents you from being distracted by everyday things and keeps work-related aspects from taking over your private space. Of course, there are reasons that might make work at a library impossible, for example needing a computer to work. You should still try to move your work to the library.

4. Organizing Work Productively

There are three categories in dividing your time: time to work, leisure time and time for everyday tasks. The time to work should be used only for your studies, leisure time is reserved only for activities that are fun for you and with which you like to spend your free time. The time for everyday tasks is needed to organize your everyday life – it should also be considered in your schedule.

General Times. Working hours, leisure times and time for everyday tasks should be separated strictly from each other. Just as it would be at an occupation, your working hours should not exceed 8-10 hours a day and you should not work at night. During the weekends, you should have one free day. Of course, nobody is able to work 8 hours consecutively. Take breaks and schedule revision times. Schedule a lunchbreak and further longer breaks in which to relax. Create a schedule in which you input the exact times you want to spend studying as well as leisure times.

Work and Breaks. A work unit should last 45-90 minutes and should be followed by a 15-minute break. After two to four work units, you should plan an extensive break. The break is important to prevent premature fatigue and to organize and remember the learned content. If possible, the break should be free from burdensome aspects. The goal is to regain a clear head and if possible, to move. Breaks are an important interruption of the work to regenerate your energies! Effective work is not possible without breaks.

Sticking to the Schedule. You should try to stick to your schedule consistently. This is only possible if you created a realistic schedule. View your studies as you would view a vocation: you cannot choose not to go to work just because you do not feel like it. During a vocation, you would get a feedback faster, this is not the case during your study program; it requires a lot of patience. This makes it even more important to stick to your schedule properly – this also means to stop working at the scheduled time. This way rumination and guilt about whether you learned enough can be avoided.

5. The Schedule

Creating a schedule facilitates a realistic and concrete planning of the workload to be managed. By breaking down the workload into simple steps, you reduce anxiety (because you know you can manage your workload step-by-step) and you will have a good overview of the workload. You will have a specific idea of where you are at in the study process.

Rough Planning – the General Plan. In the rough planning, the goal is to achieve an overview of the available time. In this stage, it is important to schedule everyday tasks and leisure time from the beginning and to deduct this time from the working hours. Calculate in the first step how many days are available until the deadline of your project and consider possible interruptions (for example because of vacations or side jobs). Schedule free days on the weekend as well. The second step is about estimating the workload realistically. This requires a detailed overview of the workload (for example by looking into literature or checking the examination catalogue) and an estimate of how much time is needed for the required work-steps. Try to estimate this in any case, even if it is difficult! The third step connects the time available with the workload. Check whether the workload is doable in the available time. If it is not, you need to consequently change the plan and cut corners. Sometimes this means consciously planning weaknesses into the work and accepting knowledge gaps – this might be difficult but it prevents you from being bogged down and important things getting left behind. The following applies here: have the courage to have gaps! Include *buffer* times! These are time-slots you leave empty; they can be used when unexpected things happen and they provide times to regenerate.

Detailed Planning – the Weekly Plan. You transfer the rough plan into the detailed plan for the following week. Think of the exact working times and the steps you want to complete on the specific days. Set goals for every day that you want to achieve (for example summarizing a text in bullet points). Plan only two thirds of the available work-time and keep the remaining time for unexpected occurrences. Important note: Not achieving the weekly work-goals is no reason to get rid of the entire plan! You should rather search for the reasons it did not work out and adjust the plan flexibly accordingly.

6. Dealing with Difficulties Effectively

Unfortunately, a work process cannot be controlled completely with a plan. Mood swings, stress, unexpected events, listlessness and many more aspects can make the implementation of a work process difficult. Hereafter, you can find two pieces of advice in dealing with disturbances.

Rumination Booklet. During your work you can be distracted with other thoughts, be it the shopping list for the next day or the rumination about a private problem. It can be helpful in this case to write down your thoughts. That way, you can put away your thoughts and can deal with them at a later point in time. The work process is not disturbed this way and you do not have to keep the thought at the back of your head. You can use a notebook or a piece of paper for this.

Mental Blocks. Know that mental blocks during work also have the function of maintaining work continuity. Having phases at your workspace in which you digress or doze off are part of a work process. When completing written tasks, it can be helpful to “just write”, without paying attention to whether what you wrote has a good style or is creative. The point is to just get started; you can edit what you wrote later. Also add variety to your schedule, have a mix of boring and exciting tasks or change the order of tasks – this prevents boredom.

7. Practicing Self-Motivation and Using Positive Reinforcements

Motivating oneself is important as intellectual work often reaps satisfactory results after long efforts (for example understanding how concepts are linked together or passing an exam). An unfavorable schedule or doubts about the meaning of your work can quickly lead to motivational difficulties. So try to motivate yourself consistently through setting achievable goals and by rewarding yourself, by designing your workspace to be pleasant, by bringing variety into your daily life or by thinking of the long-term goals. Sometimes you might be angry with yourself or you might blame yourself (“I am too stupid for this!”, “Once more I manage to do nothing!”). This way you discourage yourself, which could lead to feelings of helplessness. Focus on what you achieved so far and begin with tasks that are easier to complete before you go on to ones that are more difficult. Positive reinforcement can also be achieved by minding what you achieved so far. This increases self-worth and self-confidence. Reward yourself when you finished a difficult task or completed one day successfully. Not only children benefit from rewards! For example, plan something very special for the evening or read a good book; do whatever you consider rewarding.

8. Planning Leisure-Time Sensibly

Your leisure-time should allow you to relax and to experience fun and enjoyment. Remember to refill your energy reserves. Remember the things that benefitted you in the past that allowed you to regain your energy. Perhaps there are things you want to try but never had the time to do. Avoid “creativity killers” like mindless watching TV, surfing on the internet as well as alcohol or drugs.

9. Learning how to Relax

Schedule moments of relaxation into your routine! Relaxation can be learned and planned into the daily schedule, for example by setting aside time for undisturbed thinking, taking a walk, etc. Specific methods like the progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or yoga can help in learning how to relax and can be used at the workspace. Stress and relaxation are mutually exclusive. Learning to relax will provide you with a tool to handle stress. Often, a small breathing exercise or a fantasy exercise can be enough to generate new energy.

10. Using Creative Freedoms

Use the free times your studies provide in a creative way. Do not forget your other interests amongst all the productive work and your lectures. Taking care of own interests as well as friendships and relationships is very important, especially during phases of high workloads and upcoming exams. Music, film, theater and good conversations should be used, especially during stressful times, to relax. Fundamentally, it is about establishing a good balance between work and leisure time. If you succeed at this, you will have a stable base that provides you with satisfaction, security and structure. You will be able to face challenges calmly during your studies and your vocational life and to work productively and creatively.

And: in case of doubt, look for a good counselor, or, if necessary, for a psychotherapist!