

Picking your  
profile.  
An academic  
guide to learning  
styles



This academic skills guide is a brief overview of a variety of learning styles, their importance in Higher Education, and strategies you can use to make the best use of your natural learning style.

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# 1. Studying in higher education

Studying at university makes very different demands on you compared with school and college.

## Scope

The scope of study at university is much wider than you will have been used to. You will not be able to read everything there is to read on your subject.

## Self-motivation

In Higher Education the focus is on you; you will be expected to study on your own much more than you may have been used to.

## Timetable

You are given much more responsibility at university for organising your own schedule.

## Reading

You are expected to do much more reading at university than you may have been used to, especially if you have been on a gap year or are a mature student.

## Lectures

A lot of university teaching is through lectures where you may be one of 200 students. It is up to you to get the most from the lectures.

## Essays

Essays at university are longer, and you need to write in an academic style with a structured argument, supporting evidence and references.

## Deadlines

Essays and assignments are often set weeks before you have to submit them. It is your responsibility to hand them in on time.

## Marking

There are many subjects in which it is impossible to get 100%. First Class Honours Degrees are awarded for a 'high level of critical and analytical ability' and 'originality of thought' rather than for just getting the answers right.

All of this means that the methods of studying that helped you to get to university need to be further developed now that you are here, and you may find the following pointers helpful.

There are many theories on the different types of learning style. In this guide, we will outline two popular theories.

# 2. Your learning style 1

Understanding your own preferred learning styles can help you study more effectively by using techniques that can really improve the way you:

- Perceive information
- Process information
- Organise and present information

## 2.1 Perceiving information

When we gather information about the world around us (including the information we need in order to study), we employ all our senses. However, some of us employ one particular sense more than the others. The VARK system assesses how much people rely on:

- Sight (Visual)
- Hearing (Aural)
- Reading and Writing
- Movement and Touch (Kinaesthetic)

An aural learner is someone who is comfortable absorbing information which they have heard or discussed. A kinaesthetic learner prefers to learn through practical classes and hands-on activities, rather than by reading books and listening to lectures. In fact, each of us uses all available senses to absorb information. However, you may find it helpful to confirm what your strengths are with regard to perception. If you want to do this, visit the VARK website, fill in the test, and check your results. (<http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire>)

## 2.2 Processing information

Once you have acquired information (by listening, reading, etc.), you then process it mentally (by thinking about it and memorising it). You will have a natural preference for how you:

### Grasp information

Do you prefer to deal with:

- abstract concepts and generalisations, or
- concrete, practical examples?

### Order information

Would you rather receive facts:

- in a logical, sequential way (to build up a picture one step at a time), or
- with an overview straight away (to show the big picture first, and then the details)?

### Engage with information

Do you prefer:

- active experimentation, or
- reflective observation?

## 2.3 Organising and presenting information

Finally, there is how you choose to share information with others. You will have a preference for how you:

- Organise information (with a holistic overview, or with detailed and logical analysis)
- Present information (verbally or using images)

## 3. Identifying your learning style

This is not just a matter of intellectual curiosity; it affects every student at university. What is important for you is that you translate university teaching into the style that you find most congenial.

### 3.1 Seeing

If you are a **Visual Learner**, you will remember things best when you have seen them.

- You will like a stimulating and orderly environment
- You probably like to use diagrams and charts

#### Study tips to help people who are visual learners

Write things down to help you learn them:

- Use visual materials such as pictures, charts, and maps
- Use colour to highlight photocopied texts and own notes
- Take notes or use handouts; look carefully at headings and patterns of topics
- Brainstorm using illustrations, mind maps, goal-setting charts and models
- Use multi-media where possible (computers; mind maps)
- Study in a quiet place away from visual disturbances
- Visualise information as a picture
- Skim-read to get an overview before reading in detail

You can see more information at the VARK website.

### 3.2 Hearing

If you are an **Aural Learner**, you will learn best when you are listening (for example, in a lecture) and when you are involved in discussion. You will remember things best when you have heard them.

#### Study tips to help people who are aural learners

The key thing is to make use of sound:

- Participate frequently in discussions and debates
- Make speeches and presentations
- Use a digital recorder if possible instead of (or as well as) making notes
- Read text aloud
- Create musical jingles and mnemonics to aid memory
- Discuss your ideas verbally with a friend or tutorial group
- Dictate to someone else while they write your ideas down
- Speak onto a digital recorder and listen to your own ideas played back
- Find out if you study best in silence, or with music playing in the background

You can see more information at the VARK website.

### 3.3 Reading and writing

You are comfortable reading text and writing notes and essays. When you are studying graphs, charts and diagrams, you may convert them into words.

#### Study tips to help people who prefer reading and writing

The key thing is to write things down:

- Make lists, headings, glossaries, definitions
- Use dictionaries, handouts and textbooks
- Write practice essays and exam answers
- Repeatedly make notes and read them over
- Rewrite ideas and principles into other words
- Organise any diagrams, charts or graphs into statements, e.g. “The trend is...”
- Write paragraphs, and structured essay plans with introductions and conclusions
- Arrange your notes into hierarchies and points
- Write a one page overview of key points and examples for each topic

You can see more information at the VARK website.

### 3.4 Movement

If you are a kinaesthetic learner, you will learn best when you are moving around. You will remember things best when you have done them (rather than just read about them). In lectures you may make lots of notes, but tend never to look at them again.

#### Study tips to help people who are kinaesthetic learners

The key thing is to keep moving:

- Move around as you learn and revise (e.g. read while you are using an exercise bike)
- Work through problems physically
- Mentally review what you have been studying while you are swimming or jogging
- Use models and machines when you can
- Use bright colours to highlight reading material and turn it into posters or models
- Skim-read before reading in detail
- Take frequent study breaks

You can see more information at the VARK website.

#### Most people use all four modalities

If you are one of them, there are tips for you at the VARK website.

[www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=multimodal](http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=multimodal)

## 4. Your learning style 2

Honey and Mumford devised an influential self-test, which indicates whether you are predominantly an activist, a reflector, a theorist, or a pragmatist.<sup>1</sup> There are websites where you can take a test — but you will probably get just as good an idea about your learning style (and those of your colleagues) by reading what each learning type likes and loathes.

### 4.1 Activists

Activists learn best from activities in which there are:

- New experiences and challenges from which to learn
- Short ‘here and now’ tasks involving competitive teamwork and problem-solving
- Excitement, change and variety
- ‘High visibility’ tasks such as chairing meetings, leading discussions and presentations
- Situations in which new ideas can be developed without constraints of policy and structure
- Opportunities for experimentation and to get involved

Activists learn least from, and may react against, activities where:

- They have a passive role (lectures, instructions, reading)
- They are observers
- They are required to assimilate, analyse and interpret lots of unstructured data
- They must work in a solitary way (reading and writing alone)
- Statements are ‘theoretical’ – an explanation of cause
- There is considerable repetition (practising the same skill)
- There are precise instructions with little room for manoeuvre
- They must be thorough, and tie up loose ends

### 4.2 Reflectors

Reflectors learn best from activities where:

- They are allowed or encouraged to watch, think or ponder on activities
- They have time to think before acting, to assimilate before commenting
- They can carry out careful, detailed research
- They have time to review their learning
- They need to produce carefully considered analyses and reports
- They are helped to exchange views with other people without danger, by prior agreement, within a structured learning experience
- They can reach a decision without pressure and tight deadlines

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, *The Manual of Learning Styles* (Maidenhead: Peter Honey Publications, 1992).

Reflectors learn least from, and may react against, activities where:

- They feel ‘forced’ into the limelight
- They must act without time for planning
- They are asked for an instant reaction, or ‘off the cuff’ thoughts
- They are given insufficient data on which to base a conclusion
- They have to make short cuts or do a superficial job in the interests of expediency

### 4.3 Theorists

Theorists learn best from activities where:

- What is being offered is part of a system, model, concept or theory
- They can explore methodically the associations and interrelationships between ideas, events and situations
- They can question and probe the basic methodology, assumptions or logic
- They are intellectually stretched, e.g. by being asked to analyse and evaluate, then generalise
- They are in structured situations with a clear purpose
- They see interesting ideas and concepts, whether or not they are immediately relevant

Theorists learn least from, and may react against, activities where:

- They have no apparent context or purpose
- They have to participate in situations emphasising emotions and feelings
- They are involved in unstructured activities where ambiguity and uncertainty are high
- They are asked to act or decide without a basis in policy, principle or concept
- They are faced with a mixture of alternative or contradictory techniques or methods without exploring any in depth
- They doubt that the subject matter is methodologically sound
- They feel out of tune with other participants, for example when they are with a lot of activists

### 4.4 Pragmatists

Pragmatists learn best from activities where:

- There is an obvious link between the subject matter and a ‘real life’ problem
- They are shown techniques for doing things with obvious practical advantages
- They have the chance to try out and practise techniques with coaching or feedback from a credible expert
- They see a model they can emulate, or examples and anecdotes
- They are given techniques currently applicable to their own work
- They are given immediate opportunities to implement what they have learned
- They can concentrate on practical issues, such as drawing up action plans or giving tips to others



Pragmatists learn least from, and may react against, activities where:

- The learning is not related to an immediate need they recognise
- Organisers of the learning seem distant from reality
- There are no clear guidelines
- They feel people are going around in circles rather than getting to the point
- There are political, organisational, managerial or personal obstacles to implementation
- There is no apparent reward from the learning activity, for example, higher grades

## 5. For all learners

You will need to make the most of your strengths as a learner, and practise strategies that will allow you to build up the weaker areas. The other *academic skills guides* will help you.

We all exhibit traits from each learning style, to a greater or lesser degree. Effective learners make full use of their natural preferences, while also acquiring useful features from their less dominant styles. We are not stuck with our predispositions.

Just as with any skill (such as dancing, skiing, drawing or speaking another language), practising builds up your confidence and competence. We all have incredible potential to acquire new skills, and to learn in new ways.

If you normally think of yourself as a visual learner, you will probably draw mind-maps and use coloured highlighters to help you analyse and memorise information. You may find it helpful to try a totally different approach, for example, reading some text while you walk around the room, or use an exercise bike (kinaesthetic), or read aloud (aural).

You should not feel that you are stuck in a style of learning. You should feel free to adopt the learning strategies that are most appropriate for a particular task or a particular stage in the learning process.