



Macksville  
High  
School

# Senior School Study Skills Handbook



# Introduction

Learning how to learn is one of our biggest challenges. No single method of learning guarantees success, but it is a process that we can develop and get better at. Different people learn best in different ways, and part of the journey in the Senior years is to find the strategies that work for us, and those that work best in the different subjects that we take.

To succeed and improve at anything, it is important to have a growth mindset and aim at achieving our personal best by setting targets for ourselves, being resilient and learning from our mistakes. Achieving our personal best means doing everything possible to consistently approach each task in a way that produces the best results. This means:

- Asking the right questions;
- Consulting with the best people;
- Finding the best solutions;
- Learning the best approach;
- Making a plan that will produce the best results;
- Being motivated to produce the best results you are capable of.

Doing your best is not about comparing yourself against others or even about the grade that you achieve. There will always be those who do better than you, and those that don't do as well as you. It is about setting your goals, and then striving to achieve them. To judge whether you are doing well, you need to ask yourself – am I on target? That is why you need targets. If you have a target, you know when to adjust your aim in order to have the best shot at hitting its centre.

Our performance should be measured against our goals. Suppose my friend and I get an assessment back, and my friend achieves 65%, while I only get 62%. Should I be disappointed? This really depends what my target is. If my friend is aiming for Physiotherapy at Sydney UNI (which needs an ATAR of 90) they require an average of about 70% in their four best subjects. If I am aiming for Business at UNE (which requires an ATAR of 70), I need an average of 60-62% (depending on scaling and moderation). I am actually on track, while my friend is not.

Take the example of athletes. When an interviewer asks if they are disappointed that they didn't win a medal, they often focus on their personal best time. If they achieve near this, or improve on it, they are delighted. The interviewer is usually only interested in the number of medals. The athlete realises that there are only three of these to go around, and the road to get there is by continual improvement.

In 2013, Scientific American released its findings into a study of the most successful studying strategies. The top two strategies were self-testing (i.e. using flash cards, note taking sheets, teaching others); and distributed practice (spreading out study over time and not cramming). A recent study showed that those who focus on grades, rather than how they can improve, don't do as well at the end. This study returned work to three groups. One group were only given a letter grade. The second a letter grade and a comment. The third group just received a comment. The group with the letter grade, and the group with the letter grade and comment did similarly. The reason is probably because we tend to focus on the grade and forget the rest. The group that showed the most improvement was the group with the comment only.

Having effective study strategies is vital, and for progress to occur, we need to focus on how we can improve, rather than what we have achieved. If life is only about the achievement of a gold medal, there is usually only one of these to go around, and the rest are considered 'second best'. Am I on track? Is this the best that I can do? These are great questions to ask ourselves.

## Good Luck

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## Four Roadblocks to Making Progress

1

Doing a bare minimum; doing only what is required

We need to be aiming for the maximum, not scraping by with the minimum. This means: not leaving things until the last minute; not concentrating on just what we have to do; not just making it on time; not doing the least to get by. We weren't designed this way. Our brain is far more complex and creative than the biggest computer. We are designed for big things.

2

Misunderstanding past experiences

Your past is a very inaccurate predictor of your future. Failure at something does not make you a loser. You learn by your mistakes. It enables you to move forward in a different direction. You can learn from your mistakes, rather than be defined by them.

3

Excuses

"It's not fair; it's not my fault." Excuses are disempowering and stop us moving forward, and learning from our mistakes. Blame works the same way. We will get things wrong. It is what we do next that counts most.

4

Distractions

There will always be distractions, good and bad ones that capture your attention. A distraction is anything that takes your vision away from where it was going (vision is your picture of your future). We have to plan for the long haul, rather than just for tomorrow. We have to be immovable, steadfast, committed, faithful – these are the things that keep us on track. Expressions of opinion, peer pressure, what we might read, being offended – these are the things that get us off track.



# Strategies which assist Learning

The greater the variety of study methods you use, the more that the brain reinforces what you are learning, and the stronger the neural pathways become. Different strategies will suit different topics and subjects better than others, so a combination of these different strategies work best.

Tips for visually reinforcing learning include:

- Visually represent the information and the relationship between ideas.
- Write down key words, ideas or instructions for better retention.
- Use flashcards to reinforce lessons, concepts and new words.
- Draw pictures to help explain new concepts and then explain the pictures.
- Turn your diagrams into posters and put them up on the wall of your room.
- Colour code to group similar ideas together and underscore important concepts.
- Use mind maps as a tool for revision.
- Use charts and graphics.
- Draw diagrams to show relationships.
- Use colour to highlight important information.
- Write summary notes for different topics on different coloured paper.

Tips for aurally reinforcing learning include:

- Study in groups so that you can talk out loud and explain your ideas to other individuals.
- Recite information out loud to remember it. Get someone to check your accuracy.
- Participate in question and answer sessions in class; ask lots of questions.
- Use flashcards and read them out loud to reinforce lessons, concepts and new words.
- Record your notes or spelling and then listen to the recording (e.g. on the way to school).
- Engage in conversational discussion to learn new material.

Tips for kinesthetically reinforcing learning include:

- Study in groups and incorporate activities that involve building, drawing or acting out.
- Chew gum, walk around, or rock in a chair while reading or studying.
- Use flashcards and arrange them in groups to help demonstrate relationships.
- Take frequent breaks by getting up and stretching and walking around to help get your circulation flowing.

Tips for textually reinforcing learning include:

- Interact with the text, and summarise topics into key words or phrases.
- Write an executive summary (i.e. a summary of your notes).
- Re-write the definitions of the main terms in each topic to give you additional opportunities to write down the precise definitions (and make sure you understand them).
- Annotate handouts with your own notes and questions.
- Write lists (e.g. the five causes of ...; the seven results of ... and so on).
- Use look, cover, write, check to learn material.
- Practice doing exam questions, using a timer.
- Learn some great quotes of by heart that you could use in a variety of your answers.



Keep up to date and regularly assess where you are at.

### 3 Keys to add to your 'Personal Best' toolkit



#### KEY ONE: Preparation and Attitude

Preparation brings confidence. The most successful leaders have been the ones who were thoroughly prepared, and persevered. Basketballer Michael Jordan (winner of six championship rings in the NBA) says ... "Just play. Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships. I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I can accept failure, everyone fails at something. Some people want it to happen, some wish it would happen, others make it happen. Obstacles don't have to stop you."



Excellence is about being the best that you can be – NOT about an 'A' grade. It takes sacrifice. Are you willing to pay the price?

1. Obama's speeches were always thoughtful and well-prepared, with the focus on powerful words. "A change is brought about because ordinary people do extraordinary things." He often quoted icons like Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Sam Cooke.
2. Barack Obama was a master at the use of metaphors, which he used to strengthen his remarks by vivid imagery. "In the face of our common dangers... in the winter of our hardship... let us brave the icy currents and endure what storms may come."
3. Obama over-prepared. Although it was clear in the final days of his presidential campaign that Obama would win, he had prepared both a victory speech and a concession speech. "You can't take anything for granted," he told reporters.



There are no short cuts, or 'magic bullets'.

Consider this ...

Aiming for your 'personal best' is the pursuit of excellence. Having an excellent attitude changes your circumstances. Excellence is a lifestyle, not an event ... going beyond what is required or expected. It is attractive (but can equally bring applause OR criticism). For an Olympic Swimmer, swimming 150km per week is normal. It is about going the extra mile, until the extra mile is no longer the extra mile. This doesn't mean that there will be less difficulties. Challenges will come. You need to get used to being an overcomer; to becoming stronger; to lifting greater weights.



# KEY TWO



## KEY TWO: Time Management

Your ability to manage your time and stay organised is fundamental to success in all areas of life, as well as in studying. No system of time management, no matter how fancy it is, will ever work if you don't use it consistently. Most people waste an extraordinary amount of time. Even if you add up all the things in your life, and added other 'essential' activities that you could think of, you would find that you would be losing a few hours every day. Two questions should be considered:

1. Do I always get as much study done each week as I set out to do?
2. Could I get more done in the hours that I have put aside to study?

YES NO

YES NO

You might like to try the following simple four-step time management system:

1. Map out  
THE YEAR

2. Map out  
EACH WEEK  
a) Your ideal week  
b) Plan each week

3. Map out  
EACH DAY

4. EVALUATE  
AND  
UPDATE

### Requirements:

1. Your school diary;
2. Your assessment schedule;
3. A weekly planner (create your own);
4. A yearly wall planner (Officeworks sells these);
5. A pen and a few highlighters.

1. Map out  
THE YEAR

- Using your assessment schedules, mark all the assessment dates that you can, and your exam blocks on your yearly wall planner. Include the subject and nature of the task as well as the weighting percentage.
- Mark each assessment in your diary on the corresponding page, including all relevant information about that task.
- Put a two week reminder on the appropriate page for all your major assessments. Include the subject the assessment is for and the weighting (the percentage it contributes to your total assessment mark).
- With a highlighter, clearly mark all your exam periods on your wall planner.
- With a different highlighter, mark all the holiday periods in your wall planner.



## Activity NUMBER 2

### Construct a Year Planner

Start by putting in the exam blocks, major assessments, camps, when units in individual subjects start and finish, when revision should start, and when holiday revision classes are on.

|                    | TERM 1 | TERM 2 | TERM 3 | TERM 4 |
|--------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| WEEK 1             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 2             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 3             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 4             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 5             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 6             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 7             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 8             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 9             |        |        |        |        |
| WEEK 10            |        |        |        |        |
| HOLIDAYS<br>WEEK 1 |        |        |        |        |
| HOLIDAYS<br>WEEK 2 |        |        |        |        |

## 2. Map out EACH WEEK

- a) Your ideal week
- b) Plan each week

- Using the weekly schedule, plan what you would consider to be the ideal week. Be sure to include: school; study; sport; relaxation; social activities; daily routines. You will need to do the ideal week routine exercise a few different times throughout the year, as demands change. Most likely, you will need to be allocating more study time in the last month leading up to any exam blocks.

If you don't reach your weekly study target in any one given week, make up the time on Saturday. You should also use the planner for holiday periods. In Year 12 you should be allocating one week of these holiday break weeks to study/revision/revision courses.

- Plan each week – Every weekend, you should sit down and plan the following week. Using your yearly planner and your daily diary, identify the tasks that need to be done for that week. Make sure that you include study (revision) time each week. **One hour per subject per week might be a good target** in terms of the time that should be regularly put aside. Take out your 'ideal week' and a blank weekly planner and begin to map out the coming week. Try to fit the week's tasks into the same time slots that you have allowed for these types of activities in your 'ideal week'. Keep this weekly planner in your diary and stick to it. A sample of an 'ideal week' plan might look like this:

|             | Mon           | Tues           | Wed           | Thurs          | Fri            |
|-------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|
| 6am - 7am   | Sleep In      | Get ready      | Get ready     | Get ready      | Get ready      |
| 7am - 8am   | Get ready     | Study / Revise | Study/Revise  | Study / Revise | Study / Revise |
| 8am - 9am   | Travel & read | Travel & read  | Travel & read | Travel & read  | Travel & read  |
| 9am - 10am  | School time   | School time    | School time   | School time    | School time    |
| 10am - 11am | School time   | School time    | School time   | School time    | School time    |
| 11am - 12pm | School time   | School time    | School time   | School time    | School time    |

|            |               |               |               |             |               |
|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|
| 12pm - 1pm | School time   | School time   | School time   | School time | School time   |
| 1pm - 2pm  | School time   | School time   | School time   | School time | School time   |
| 2pm - 3pm  | School time   | School time   | School time   | School time | School time   |
| 3pm - 4pm  | B/Bus Train   | Travel & read | B/Bus game    | maths tutor | Travel & read |
| 4pm - 5pm  | Travel & read | Study         | Travel & read | Study       | Study         |
| 5pm - 6pm  | Spare time    | Study         | Spare time    | Study       | Study         |

|            |                |                |                |                |                |
|------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 6pm - 7pm  | Dinner / Spare | Dinner / Spare | Dinner / Spare | Dinner / Spare | Dinner / Spare |
| 7pm - 8pm  | Study          | Study          | Study          | SHOPS          | Youth Group    |
| 8pm - 9pm  | Study          | Study          | Study          | Shops          | Youth Group    |
| 9pm - 10pm | Study/Revise   | tv             | Study          | travel / Tv    | TRavel / tv    |

Saturday should have a planned study slot between 9am and 1pm (or 2pm - 6pm), depending on other activities, with more time devoted if needed. Always keep one day free as a rest day.



Time is an INVESTMENT; it needs to be invested purposefully and wisely (i.e. you are investing for a future return).





## Activity NUMBER 3

### Construct a 5 Weekly Study Timeline

To create a study plan, begin by reflecting on how your time is spent and prioritise what is important. Online study time needs to fit into your schedule. But you should aim to study when you are well rested and mentally alert. Establish some sort of study goal before or at the beginning of each study session. Having a goal boosts motivation, makes you accountable and ensures you keep making progress. Be realistic about what you can accomplish.

Study plans need balance. Include rewards (e.g. free time) after you achieve your study goals.

#### 1. Assess your current schedule

A good starting point is to assess how you currently spend your time to help you identify how much time is available for study. You might also find activities that waste time and can be cut.

#### 2. Construct a timetable

To prepare a timetable, start by blocking out times where there are commitments. Then you can start allocating time for important things, including your course. To succeed, you need to set aside a good number of hours for each course for reading, homework, and revision. Your timetable needs to leave room for extra study (in case you need it) and time for yourself.

#### 3. Set study goals

You can do this formally or just spend some time thinking about it. Good students set long term and short term goals. A longer term goal (for a course) might be to complete all readings and exercises before entering the exam period. A short term goal might be to work solidly for the next hour before you take a break.

#### 4. Establish good habits

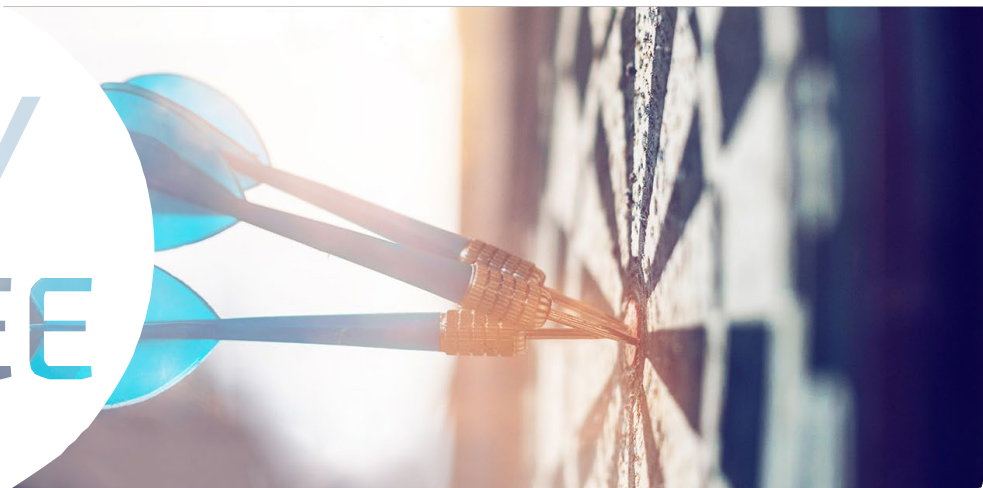
A study plan works best if it is followed consistently. It helps to start well early on and build great habits. These help carry you through during any periods when you might be busy, tired or just down on motivation.

# Weekly Study Timetable

|              | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|--------------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|
| 6-7.00       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7- 8.00      |        |         |           |          |        |
| 3-3.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 3.30-4       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 4-4.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 4.30-5       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 5-5.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 5.30-6       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6-6.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6.30-7       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7-7.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7.30-8       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 8-8.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 8.30-9       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 9-9.30       |        |         |           |          |        |
| 9.30-10      |        |         |           |          |        |
| 10-<br>10.30 |        |         |           |          |        |

|       | Saturday | Sunday |
|-------|----------|--------|
| 6-7   |          |        |
| 7-8   |          |        |
| 8-9   |          |        |
| 9-10  |          |        |
| 10-11 |          |        |
| 11-12 |          |        |
| 12-1  |          |        |
| 1-2   |          |        |
| 2-3   |          |        |
| 3-4   |          |        |
| 4-5   |          |        |
| 5-6   |          |        |
| 6-7   |          |        |
| 7-8   |          |        |
| 8-9   |          |        |
| 9-10  |          |        |
| 10-11 |          |        |

# KEY THREE



## KEY THREE: Goal Setting

A goal is something you want to achieve. A short-term goal is something you want to achieve soon. Examples of short-term goals are finishing your homework and doing well on tomorrow's test. A long-term goal is something you want to achieve by a later date. Examples of long-term goals are writing a paper or passing a class. To set appropriate goals, you must know what is important for you to accomplish. Then set specific and clearly stated goals. If you do not have clearly stated goals, your effort will lack direction and focus. Write your goals down so that you have a record of them.



Setting goals is a great start but creating a plan to accomplish the goal is the key to achieving it. To be your best means developing a realistic and well-defined plan to achieve your goals.

### Characteristics of appropriate goals

Each goal you set should state WHAT you will do and WHEN you will accomplish it. Implied in each goal you set is your WILL (determination) to do it. For example, a goal for a research paper might be stated as follows: I will (your determination) finish gathering information for my research paper (what you will do) by 20 November (when you will accomplish it).

Your goals should be:

- 1 Within your skills and abilities  
Knowing your strengths and weaknesses will help you set goals you can accomplish.
- 2 Realistic  
Setting a goal to learn the spelling of three new words a day is realistic. Trying to learn the spelling of fifty new words a day is not realistic.
- 3 Flexible  
Sometimes things will not go the way you anticipate and you may need to change your goal. Stay flexible so when you realise a change is necessary, you will be ready.
- 4 Measurable  
It is important to be able to measure your progress towards a goal. It is important to recognise when you have accomplished your goal and need to go no further. Failure to measure your progress toward a goal and recognise its accomplishment will result in effort that is misdirected and wasted.
- 5 Within your control  
Other than when working as part of a group, accomplishment of your goal should not depend on other students. You can control what you do, but you have little or no control over what others do. You may do what you have to do, but if others don't, you will not accomplish your goal. At times your parents, teachers, and counsellors will set goals for you. Be accepting when they do. These are people who know what is important for you and are concerned with your success. They have walked the same journey as you. They can also help you accomplish the goals they set.



Set goals in school that provide you with direction and lead to success. Keep your focus on the goal ... this is the reward for your sacrifices.

### Regularly review your goals and keep them in a visible place

You should have your goals written in big letters (or cut out some pictures if you are a more visual person) over your study desk, if not on the wall of your bedroom. This will constantly remind you of what you are trying to achieve, and why. If you have given yourself enough reasons why you should achieve your goal, it will show you why you need to sacrifice the time to go back to sitting at your desk, and get on with the task.

### Prioritise

What often holds people back is not knowing where to start. Sometimes it is so overwhelming that you just don't do anything at all. If you ever get to that point, ask yourself what is the most important thing you have to do, and do that one thing. When you have completed this, stop again and ask the same question and then do that one thing. Even the tallest mountain is climbed the same way as every other one ... one step at a time. Break down your tasks, assignments or study sessions into individual steps and simply deal with them one at a time.

### Start small and build your way up

There is no need to start with three hours of studying at a time straight away. Why not increase by 20 minutes each day? Within two weeks, you will have eased your way up to your target. Just start your momentum moving in a positive direction.



Improvement is the stepping stone towards the achievement of your personal best.

### It is never too late

Just get started right away. Even if you are only one month away from exams, putting in a solid effort for the next month is better than not putting in any effort at all. You have nothing to lose.

### Plan your study time (have a schedule)

Having a set time really helps you to stay on track.

### Reward your efforts

When you set a small goal, like 'complete all the Human Biology summaries by Friday night', give yourself a reward if you complete it on time. It is good fun coming up with the rewards and it gives you something to work towards.



Keep the end in mind. This means knowing what you want the outcome to be and working backwards starting from the top to achieve it. This means having a clear vision in your mind to help you set the proper goals.



## Activity NUMBER 4

### Goal Setting

#### 1. Personal Goals

Set two personal goals, work out a timeline / plan of how you might go about achieving those goals, and note down what resources you have or will need to achieve your goals.

|        |               |           |
|--------|---------------|-----------|
| Goal 1 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |
| Goal 2 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |

#### 2. Subject or Study Goals

Set four subject goals (e.g. what scores you are aiming at in particular subjects), work out a timeline / plan of how you might go about achieving those goals, and note down what resources you have or will need to achieve your goals.

|        |               |           |
|--------|---------------|-----------|
| Goal 1 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |
| Goal 2 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |
| Goal 3 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |
| Goal 4 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |

#### 3. Career Goals / Options (see following section)

Set two career goals, work out a timeline / plan of how you might go about achieving those goals, and note down what resources you have or will need to achieve your goals.

|        |               |           |
|--------|---------------|-----------|
| Goal 1 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |
| Goal 2 | Timeline/Plan | Resources |