

Study Skills

To keep on top of your work you need to develop good study skills. As part of your undergraduate study, we will be helping you to develop important soft or **transferable skills** such as planning, time management and multi-tasking so that you can manage your learning more effectively. These skills are life-skills and are as critical for study as they are for the world of work. When you are planning your study time, try to remember that for every hour of class, you should be doing at least an hour of private study.

Getting the Most out of Language Learning¹

Many students assume that if they expose themselves to German by reading and by listening to the spoken language, this will go a long way towards ensuring that their German will improve steadily. Unfortunately, the notion of passive exposure as an effective method of language learning is a myth. **In order to learn a language, you must practise using it actively.** This document is intended to give you some ideas about how to increase your knowledge of German and to suggest study skills which will be effective both in the classroom and beyond.

Please note that the advice applies equally to Dutch or any other language which you may be studying. Specific reference to German is a matter of convenience only.

Aims and Goals

As a language learner you will have your own aims and goals which relate to your own experience and to your career and life plans. Besides your own goals, the Department also sets targets for you which aim to ensure that

- you will be able to use German correctly and with confidence both in speech and in writing;
- you will reach the level necessary to use German professionally, for example in secondary teaching, translating, European administration and in companies which trade with the German-speaking world;
- your degree will be of an internationally recognised standard.

It is important that you should be able to communicate your ideas in German that can be understood by native speakers. We believe that this is possible only when you have the ability to combine words in meaningful and accurate structures. That is to say, **we expect you to concentrate on form as well as on content.** In order to help you maximise your practice in understanding spoken German, the Department usually conducts its teaching in German.

¹ We acknowledge with gratitude permission to adapt parts of this section on language learning from the CLCS Language Module Information documents.

Language Classes

It is an essential minimum that you attend all the language classes which are offered for your course and year group, and that you do all the prescribed written work. Besides this, you need to consider the following points:

- Keep a notebook for recording the vocabulary you encounter in class. After class, you should go through this vocabulary notebook and check that the spelling of each word is correct; that you have noted the gender and plural of all nouns and that you have noted any irregular verb forms.
- The contents of your vocabulary notebook will need to be learnt. Remember that there is no point in learning words in isolation: in natural language they occur in a context. You should ask yourself e.g., which verbs commonly accompany the nouns you have noted, look them up and add them to your notes.
e.g. You have noted 'die Entscheidung' in your book. Common collocations with 'decision' are 'reach a decision', 'take / make a decision'. Look these combinations up in a good dictionary and note them for learning. (-> 'eine Entscheidung treffen / fällen').
- When your homework is returned, you should read through all the corrections and make sure that you understand why your version was wrong. If you don't understand, ask your teacher, who will probably leave time for this purpose in class. At home, go back over the work and see if you can correct the errors in your work by using a dictionary and a grammar. If you have made mistakes in words or phrases which you use frequently, you should try to note down the correct version for learning.
- Ask questions in class whenever something is said which you don't understand: remember, you may be helping others as well as yourself.

Private Study

In the modular language courses you will find that in most years an hour is scheduled for 'private study'. Your teacher will explain what this involves in each individual module, but the following general remarks should be applicable to all courses. Above all, remember that organised private study is now part of the course, and that you are required to show evidence that you have engaged in it regularly, whether by handing in worksheets or by discussing in class the material you have read, listened to or watched.

Reading

Before reading a text you should take out your dictionary and place it at the ready. Try to use your copy of *Langenscheidts Großwörterbuch Deutsch als Fremdsprache* as your first reference book, and use a German-English dictionary only as a last resort. This will encourage you to understand what you read in German without mental translation.

- Before reading, cast a quick eye over the text and use headings, sub-headings, pictures and other clues to find out what the topic of the text is. Remember that words occurring in headings are probably keywords which you will need to understand: if the title of the text is 'Bei den Elchen in Schweden' and you don't understand the word 'Elch', you will need to look it up.

- It may be helpful to try to predict what vocabulary will come up in the text, and check it out in advance. If the title of the text is 'Präsident Rabin ermordet', for instance, you will need to know words like 'assassin', 'shoot', 'ambulance', 'arrest'. If you aren't sure what these words are in German, look them up in advance so that you have a capsule vocabulary of keywords. Remember that whenever your language course deals with media items, it will be easier for you to deal with them if you have been watching the news and reading the papers at home, as you will then be able to use your general knowledge to support your comprehension.
- Now start reading the text. In the first instance, read the text right through and work out what the main actions or events are. **Don't** look up every single word you don't know: this is very demoralising, and will prevent you from getting an overall picture of what the text is about. Your capsule vocabulary will help you to read for gist. Look out for structural points in the text which will help you to understand it: for instance, many newspaper stories begin with a summary, and many texts will also conclude with a comment which pulls the whole story together. Look out for obvious clues that the text is moving on to a new item in the shape of words like 'erstens', 'zweitens', or 'auf der einen Seite', 'auf der anderen Seite'.
- After the first reading, try to summarise the text mentally. If you have understood the main points, you can now go back and fill in any details that seem relevant, or (in a comprehension test), that are the object of explicit questions. You will always be most likely to understand specific points if you are clear about what the text as a whole is about. If you have not understood the main points it is probably the case that there were keywords you did not understand: look these up and begin reading again.

DVDs etc

- You will be able to follow most of the same steps for watching a DVD as you followed for reading texts. Instead of scanning through the text, it is a worthwhile exercise to watch the DVD with the volume turned down and try to guess what the topic and keywords will be. You can then proceed to a capsule vocabulary as above.
- Audio material is not open to scanning through in advance: for this reason, you will generally only be asked to use recordings where a detailed table of contents or transcript is available. If you are using audio material with a transcript, remember that you will get a deceptive impression of how well you really understand what you are hearing. For this reason it is a good idea to scan the transcript in, say, 15 seconds and then lay it aside after getting an impression of the general content.

Private Study (Free)

It is inevitable that the material you encounter in language classes and in the private study programme will not always be exactly what you feel you need at a particular time. Sometimes, it will require prior knowledge in an area that you don't know much about; at other times, you will already be familiar with the area being covered. You can bridge these periods in your language learning by working on your own initiative, and you may find some of the following suggestions useful.

- Assess yourself and your own abilities. Why are you not getting the most out of classes? If there are areas which you would need to understand, but don't, try to list them. If your difficulties concern concrete areas of vocabulary or grammar, your teacher will be able to advise you on using the appropriate language learning resources to cover the areas where you feel you are deficient. If you have difficulty expressing yourself in class, on the other hand, because you lack confidence, you may find it helpful to form a study group with classmates (who may well be in the same position) and try to talk German to each other over a coffee break or in lunchtime.
- Set yourself tasks which you can achieve quite quickly, list them and tick them off as you accomplish them. For instance, you might set yourself the task of learning the genders of the nouns you got wrong in last week's homework, or the principal parts of the irregular verbs. You might then extend this into a series of goals building up to something bigger, such as working through the list of strong and irregular verbs listed in your grammar book, or reading a certain number of pages of a short story. If you focus on concrete targets, however small, you will have a greater sense of achievement and progress than if you simply tell yourself vaguely that your goal is to be fluent in German some day.
- At regular intervals, re-assess your targets and plan ahead. Try to achieve a balance of targets between what you want and what the Department wants for you. Whereas on the one hand you will need to check that you have the necessary skills to pass the exam, on the other hand it will not necessarily be either interesting or fruitful simply to practise exam techniques all year. Remind yourself of the other reasons why you are learning German - to meet people, to watch German films, to follow German news and events, to read German literature ... Effective learning goes hand in hand with interest and enjoyment.

You can always ask any member of the Department for advice on language learning: in the first instance you should approach the co-ordinator for your year.