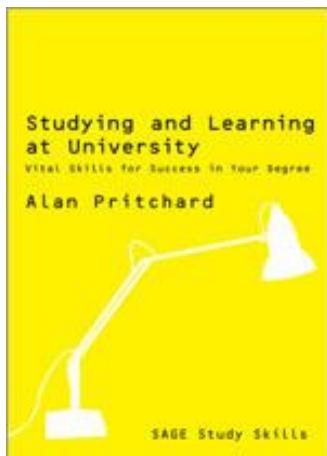


## Book Review



### **Studying and Learning at University: Vital Skills for Success in your Degree**

By Alan Pritchard

London: Sage Publications (2008).

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Reviewed by **Jennifer McGowan**

'Studying and Learning at University' is a guide written by a university lecturer and designed for undergraduate students looking for an 'edge' in their degree. It describes methods of learning, reading and writing reports in extensive detail in eight brief chapters. It is especially good for those looking for tips on choosing which papers to read and how to write them up in the most effective manner and is not for students looking for information on university life outside of studying.

Chapter one covers how we learn, from the perspective of psychological processes, and how this affects the strategies we use to revise. The theories themselves are quite dense and not fully explained, which may discourage and confuse readers without a solid background in psychology (having just completed a psychology degree myself, I still found it heavy going). However, it is worth reading on as the following pages are laid out in a much more understandable style and are far more relevant to undergraduate students. They cover how to effectively revise in relation to sleep, food, the environment and company as well as a questionnaire to work out your own learning style.

The following chapters then work through effective ways to learn (how to read sources efficiently; what sources are worth reading and different strategies for taking effective notes); researching (how to use library and internet resources); and writing (how to write good essays, reports, exam answers and presentations) throughout the reader's degree. Chapters six through eight are especially good, laying out the process of preparing and writing each of essay writing, exams and presentations in great detail and giving a universal check-list of ways in which lecturers assess work.

The book is quite noticeably written by a lecturer well-versed in the writing of papers, as is evident from not only the content, but also the writing style and background research used to demonstrate the validity of the techniques before they are suggested (Chapter 1). While this makes it an excellent example of good writing skills, it may be difficult for undergraduates new to the style and as such is of more use to continuing students trying to get ahead than complete beginners (who may be scared off). For the same reason, it is unlikely to be suitable for students for whom English is not a first language. The book also moves at quite a fast pace, using diagrams and tables that are not always fully explained in the text (for example the complex image of a schema in chapter 2). The chapters on revision technique require some translating from the student - both from 'academic speak' to plain language and from theories into useful pointers - and as such are not suitable for those that would rather have the rules laid out for them point by point.

Having said that, while the language assumes a greater level of understanding than many first-time undergraduates may have, the lay-out is designed to be as simple as possible. Similar to most textbooks that undergraduates will use, there are 'key principles' boxes throughout, summing up the most important points, and activities at the end of each chapter to assess the reader's understanding. The chapters are fairly brief, except chapter six, which is on essay writing and (appropriately) the focus of the book. Dictionary definitions of key points are also abundant throughout, although whether they help or hinder understanding is debatable. The basic principles on revision and essay writing outlined in the book, however, are well written and would be of use to all students. However, I would suggest that it would be of most use to undergraduates of science degrees, as the focus is primarily on writing in the style of scientific journals.

It is difficult to see the place for a 216-page book on study skills, in an age where most of the information can be found online in a much simpler format. However, the sheer amount of information found in the book, along with topics usually not usually associated with study skills such as library, internet and presentation skills, relaxation exercises for coping with exam stress and what undergraduate skills are useful for job applications makes it by far the most comprehensive student self-help book that I have read. Everything relevant to undergraduate learning, and much that is not, can be found in this book. As such, I would recommend it for most student bookshelves at some point in their undergraduate studies. Whether or not they actually get round to reading it, it will make them feel more secure simply by being there.