

Victoria Boyd & Stephanie McKendry



GETTING READY FOR YOUR NURSING DEGREE

The studySMART
guide to learning
at university

Getting Ready for Your Nursing Degree

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Getting Ready for Your Nursing Degree

The studySMART guide to learning at university

Victoria Boyd

Stephanie McKendry



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Companion Website for students

- Multiple choice quizzes
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- Video and audio clips
- Assessment and revision planning templates to download

Preface

Whether you are already at university, are considering undertaking training within the NHS, or are just thinking about joining the healthcare profession, this book will help you prepare for studying.

More and more people are thinking about a career in nursing or healthcare, people who may never have wanted to be a student or seen themselves as very academic. But don't be put off by the fact that nursing is taught at university level. Just as, with practice, anyone can learn a practical skill such as changing a dressing, we believe anyone can learn the academic skills needed for university. This book will provide you with tasks and activities to support you in developing into an independent learner ready for university work.

The more you can work on your skills before or immediately on joining your programme, the quicker you will adjust to the course. This is true whether you are moving straight from school or college or have been away from education for some time. This book looks at all aspects of university work in a straightforward way, providing advice, examples and activities designed to help you get the most from classes, research and assessments. It is designed with nursing students in mind and is tailored towards the skills you will need not only for your course but for your career as a nurse.

Not just your average student

Studying nursing at university is different from learning any other subject. For a start, half of your time will be spent on placement: in a ward, community setting or other clinical area. You'll have lectures and theory to learn, but you'll also quickly be in the real world, applying what you've learned and caring for real people. The minute you enrol you are considered a healthcare professional and have to abide by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code. Try asking that of a sociology student or someone on a physics degree!

Preface

In other words, your life will be complicated:

- You will have to manage your time and balance lots of commitments (part-time work, placement shifts, assessment deadlines, social life).
- You may have to learn in new ways (lectures, tutorials, in clinical environments, in groups).
- You have to produce different kinds of work (essays, clinical documents, demonstrations of clinical skills).

So, to succeed, you will have to learn all of the theory, all of the clinical skills, and adjust to life in two, potentially, new environments (university and placement). It sounds difficult, but don't panic. If you are confident in your academic skills and you know the way you work best, you'll be able to do all of the other learning. That's where this book comes in.

What's in the book?

We've organised the content of the book to introduce academic skills in the order in which you're likely to need them.

- **Chapter 1** gets you to think about your past learning and how you can adapt your existing skills for life on a nursing degree. *Is a lack of confidence holding you back? Do negative experiences in the past still affect your beliefs about yourself and your abilities?*
- **Chapter 2** looks at studying at university. It covers what will be expected of you, what types of skills you'll need, as well as other things you need to think about, like your family and work commitments. *Universities use their own special language sometimes - we'll help you translate.*
- **Chapter 3** introduces the strategies and skills you'll need in class. *How do you concentrate for a full hour's lecture and come away with notes that will be useful? What on earth is expected of you in a problem-based learning (PBL) seminar?*
- **Chapter 4** is all about reading: finding information, understanding it and deciding what to use and what to discard. Nursing is an evidence based profession - you need to be able to get hold of and evaluate that evidence. *How do you know which resources to trust?*

- By **Chapter 5**, you'll have been to class, done the reading, and now you need to write something. It outlines the building blocks of academic writing - conventions, tone, and the dos and the don'ts. *You might have written essays before, but did they include references and up-to-date evidence for EVERYTHING you say?*
- **Chapter 6** is more of an in-depth look at essays in particular: how you go from being given the question and the hand-in date to submitting the final piece of writing. It covers planning, structure and looks at common mistakes to help you avoid some obvious pitfalls. *Does your essay present your reader with a logical argument? Do all of your sub-topics link together in a clear order?*
- **Chapter 7** recognises that assessments at university aren't just about essays. There are exams and numeracy tests, for example, and they require slightly different skills. Some people prefer essays, some people prefer exams, but you really need to be pretty good at all of them as they're skills you'll need in the workplace, once you're a nurse. This chapter looks at how to revise and tackle university exams. *How will you know what to revise? How will you divide up your time during the exam?*
- **Chapter 8** focuses on other types of assessment. In particular it explains and gives advice on reflective assessments, presentations and group work. *Do you know the distinctive features of reflective writing? Where will it fit in to your future practice?*

How to use the book

The chapters build on one another and take you through the skills as you work towards your first assessment, but they also all stand alone. So if your main concern is writing, for example, you can go straight to Chapters 5 and 6.

The book can be used before you start your programme, or even if you are thinking about applying to study nursing. That way, you'll have worked on your skills beforehand. *Getting Ready for Your Nursing Degree* will also be useful at any time within your first year, so you can practise note-taking while at a lecture, etc. But, equally, it never does any harm to review your academic skills at any point in the degree, so

Preface

If you are in your second year and really want to work on your research skills, this book will be a handy companion.

Our advice on getting ready

If you only have time to do five things before you really get stuck in to your degree, we would recommend the following:

1. Read this book. Complete the activities and have a look at the additional features on the companion website.
2. Regularly read a nursing newspaper (such as the *Nursing Standard* or the *Nursing Times*). You could subscribe, or your big local library is likely to hold copies. This will help familiarise you with current issues and nursing language.
3. Keep a diary or learning journal. Record what work you do, how successful you were and other details. This will help you see your study habits. When are your energy levels at their highest? When is it pointless to even try to do some reading?
4. Look at your university's website, and find out as much as you can about what support is available to you.
5. Gather information about your degree. Is there anything specific you can do to prepare, such as reading the introductory textbook?

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Chapter 1

Taking the obs

'Starting my nursing degree was one of the scariest things I've ever done. It was like entering an alien universe. I hadn't been in a classroom for 20 years let alone a lecture theatre. But, after some initial panicking, I soon realised it was one of the best decisions I've made'.

Third-year child nursing student

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- Discuss in what ways your feelings and memories of education affect you now
- Evaluate your current skills and plan ways in which they could be adapted for use at university
- Understand and translate university/academic language

Introduction

This chapter is all about you: the way your previous educational experiences continue to affect you, the role that confidence can play in being a successful learner, and the wealth of skills you already have that will prove useful at university.

The role of confidence and your past experiences

Ready for take-off?

When starting any new journey, such as a new course and career, it's natural to feel excited or nervous (or both), but research has proven that how positively you approach a task can have an impact on how successful you are. Think about it - if too many of the little voices in your head are telling you that you can't do it, that's bound to have an effect.

So, make a bit of a space for yourself before we get down to the academic skills. How are you feeling? What's behind those nerves or that feeling of excitement?



ACTIVITY 1.1: ANYTHING TO DECLARE?

- 1. List five words or phrases that describe how you feel about studying for a nursing degree. Are you anxious, over the moon or bored?

.....

.....

.....

- 2. Write down one thing that you are really excited about or that you hope to get from your degree.

.....

.....

.....

3. Now write down one thing that worries you about your studies.

Turn to the feedback section at the end of this chapter to read our comments.

Any baggage to check in?

In many cases, the way that we feel about a particular thing is influenced by our past experiences of it. So when joining a new course, you're obviously going to be affected by how you've learned before, even if you haven't realised it yet.

It could be from school, college or a course that you reluctantly went on for work, but we all have baggage. Everyone has had a teacher who has made them feel that they could achieve anything: the maths teacher who went over fractions with you, using their own sandwiches, until you got it; the family member who knew you would pass your driving test and gave you the confidence to go for it. But similarly, there are those experiences that have had a negative impact, and they're often stronger: the swimming instructor who shouted at you; the other maths teacher who seemed to think there was something wrong with you because it took you a bit longer to understand fractions. All of these experiences create messages for us, and sometimes we still listen to them too strongly.

You're a completely different person today, and you needn't be stuck in a cycle. You're motivated, you're beginning a new course and there's going to be lots of support available. The reason that this book exists is that we firmly believe that academic skills, like any other, take time and practice to develop. Some people are more academic than others; their strengths are in writing, for example, but anyone can learn to produce a strong essay.



ACTIVITY 1.2: YOUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES OF LEARNING

1. Think of some really good experiences of learning in the past. What made them so enjoyable and effective? How did you feel? What message did you take from them, and what have they helped you to do today?

2. Now think of a time where learning wasn't quite so straightforward. Did it give you negative feelings? If so, did they affect your confidence, and more importantly, do they continue to?

Turn to the feedback section at the end of the chapter to read our comments.

Recalling these memories will give you an opportunity to think about where your strengths lie and where you might need a bit of development.

Any nervous flyers?

Most people have pretty concrete ideas about their skills, attitudes, and abilities. So they take these beliefs with them when beginning a new degree. The psychologist Carol Dweck refers to these as 'self theories' and believes they can have a big impact on learning and motivation. She suggests that students tend to hold one of two views about intelligence:

1. *An entity theory of intelligence*

Some people think that your level of intelligence is fixed. You are simply born with a certain amount of it and can't do anything to change that. So, for example, you might believe that your sister is the smart one in the family, whereas you have no academic abilities

whatsoever. The problem with this theory of intelligence is that it can stop people from putting in any effort - what's the point if you don't think it will make any difference? Students who hold this view of themselves can struggle to stay motivated or may not complete assessments. They can feel quite helpless because it seems like they have no control over anything.

2. An incremental theory of intelligence

Another view is that intelligence or ability is malleable, i.e. it can change. So, just like riding a bike, you may not be able to do it the first time you try, but the more you practise, the better you get. Students who hold this latter view are more likely to put in effort to master a particular skill or complete an assessment. They believe that their effort will have an effect, will produce a reward, like a good mark or personal satisfaction.

As you can imagine, there is some evidence to suggest that if you believe the entity theory, this can have a negative effect on your academic performance, especially if you lack confidence in your abilities. We believe in the incremental theory and that's basically what this book is about. If you put in the effort and practise you can develop strong academic skills.

If you want to know more about motivation and theories of intelligence and self, the main text to read is Dweck, C. S. (1999). *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development*. Philadelphia, PA: The Psychology Press. There are also lots of websites so a quick internet search will give you a good start.

What's your view of intelligence? Which theory makes most sense to you?

A note on positive thinking

Sports coaches put great emphasis on the power of a positive mental attitude. Athletes are encouraged to visualise crossing the finishing line in first place or scoring the winning goal. Research suggests this can have an effect on performance - if you imagine you are going to win, it can help you to do so.