

“Your first draft is not your last” – Transcript

I’m Becky Hartnup and I’m studying a Global MBA at Imperial Business School.

I work as a consultant and, whilst I’ve got an awful lot of experience behind me, I wanted to learn some of the key frameworks, some of the terminology, and also to change my way of thinking so that I could apply my understanding to other industries.

What do you enjoy most about being a student?

My favourite thing about being a student is meeting with other people who are really interested in learning and really excited by discovering new things. It’s also great having time where I can legitimately read stuff that I otherwise wouldn’t look at.

The worst thing, I think, is there’s never any time when you feel you shouldn’t be doing something, because there’s always something extra you could be preparing. You never really have downtime.

Do you have any tips for someone who is about to start at university?

I think the most important thing is to make sure that you’ve committed enough time to do what you need to do. And that’s in terms of looking up what your course entails, how many hours study you need each week, but also your other activities. Are you already overscheduled? Is it hard to fit your learning in there?

The other piece of advice I’d give is to get as much out of the experience as you can. Make as many connections with other people [as you can]. They’ll be able to help you by pointing you to useful resources, talking through ideas and giving you support when things get tough.

How do you keep organised?

I’m not a highly organised person and, actually, if I focus too hard on organising myself it takes energy away from the task I’m actually trying to carry out.

So instead of spending hours making revision plans, I try and focus on what’s important. I try and prioritise, know what my key goals are.

I also do have lists. I use lists a lot to break tasks down into their separate parts. Otherwise you end up with a single task on your list which is ‘do an essay’ and that really means ‘go through all the course material, do the reading, do the plan’.

You need to separate those out into separate chunks and ideally schedule them into your diary as separate chunks with time allocated to each part.

I think scheduling those items into your diary helps, because you know that’s time that you’ve committed to do that task and you know that you want to be at a certain stage by the end of that time. So you’ve got a really clear objective there.

The woollier the objective, the easier it is to get distracted – and to not know when you’ve finished and you can actually go and have a break.

How do you stay on top of your workload?

I'm much better at managing my time now than I was when I was an undergraduate. I think I'm much clearer about what my outputs are, what the different sections of the task are. I clearly separate out the phases of carrying out my reading, doing my note-taking, building a plan for my essay, doing a first draft of an essay which is allowed to be rubbish and then going back and editing that. That's helped me manage my time.

I also think working helped me manage my time because you have real deadlines and real people to answer to, and actually getting into that habit of meeting deadlines is really, really useful.

What are your tips for effective reading?

One of the most important is to know why you're reading something. Are you reading it to get a general overview – and actually, can you get away with reading the abstract and the conclusion? Or is it a really core learning piece, which is something that perhaps you didn't know before you started and you may want to read once or twice? On those you don't want to skim, you want to allocate enough time to do it.

I download my reading onto a device so that I can read when I'm stuck on the Tube. I read when I'm waiting for my children to come out of their various activities. I don't feel the need to read something in one go. I just need to read it in understandable sections that make sense. It's also alright to go back and reread something if it hasn't made sense.

I think it's really, really important to stay on top of reading because otherwise, when that essay or assignment hits you, you'll have to go back and start from scratch.

What makes the writing process easier for you?

I think one tip for making the writing process easier is to know that your first draft isn't going to be your last draft.

You need to leave yourself time to write a first draft that's rubbish and then go back and edit it and make it stronger.

It's much easier to edit a piece and make it stronger than it is to write a great essay in one blast.

I think my tip for writing more than one essay at the same time would be to be very clear at the beginning how important each essay is. Assignments have different weightings – and they have different lengths. You might have a 1,500 word essay and a 4,000 word essay and it's important to be aware of that from the outset.

And then again, chunking it back into the stages of writing the essay. You don't want to get to a point where you're on the final draft of one essay and you're still doing your reading for the other essay if they've both got the same deadline.

What advice do you have for better referencing?

My tip on referencing is ideally, do it when you're doing the reading. It's horrible having to go back and search through an article to find a quote. It's even more horrible if you've got a wonderful quote but you can't actually remember where it came from. So the answer is: do it when you're reading.