

Managing postgraduate coursework

Learning to juggle successfully

Postgraduate course work degrees provide students with advanced knowledge in an area of study. There is a growing recognition that coursework study carries many unique challenges for students.

For example, course work students may:

- be juggling paid work, family commitments and study
- have been away from formal study for some years, thus be unsure of academic expectations, and may be unfamiliar with changes in scholarship or advances in information technology
- be studying in a new academic area, undertaking subjects from different disciplines simultaneously, and consequently working on multiple assessment tasks requiring a range of text types
- not feel confident in their student role and feel they lack effective peer support
- feel pressured by having to master new material within the twelve week semester and be conversant with a range of academic expectations.

Successfully surviving the complexities of coursework studies and maintaining your other life roles can at times be quite overwhelming. However, by managing your time efficiently, using proven study strategies and taking advantage of available resources, a postgraduate coursework program can be a positive and enjoyable experience.

This pamphlet discusses a range of strategies you can use to manage your coursework study more effectively.



Wall
planner

Use your time efficiently

Effective time management is the key to getting everything done

Aim for control of your time by planning a balanced working week that includes leisure, work, and family life as well as study. Use a **wall planner** to schedule your tasks across the week and the semester. Continually reassess and change your schedule, but keep control.

Know how, when and where you work best

Do you like to focus on, and complete one task before going on to the next or do you like the variety of undertaking several tasks at once? Are you able to achieve more at home or at the library? When do you find you are best able to concentrate on complex texts or complete demanding academic work? Use this information to plan your study schedule.

Plan each day to complete specific tasks and use all the time available to you as efficiently as possible

For example: mentally review work on the train; email questions before meetings with lecturers; or check library resources online. Create shortcuts such as: work collaboratively with other students, use technology to advantage, cook a few meals at one time or spread housework through the week so there is some free time on weekends for study.

Enlist the help and support of others

For example, delegate home care jobs to family members; find out if work provides time off for study or the option of a more flexible work schedule; let your lecturers know if you are working and studying; many of them may be doing the same and may be able to share some tips and ideas.

Link work and study

If you are undertaking study related to your work in a specific field or organisation, link work and study by choosing familiar topics or projects in which you want to extend your knowledge. This will save background research time, will provide a context and rationale for your investigation and may allow you to make a valuable contribution to your workplace.

Academic Skills

Get involved with university life

As a postgraduate coursework student you may feel you lack an effective peer cohort. You may rarely come into contact with the same students for a range of reasons. Like many course work students you may feel that you are working in isolation.

However, it is important to make time to meet and talk with other students and to get involved with your faculty activities. Make productive use of the Faculty's Resource Centre and libraries. From this you can form networks with other students who are in similar situations to yourself. This can develop into beneficial collaborative working groups, where you can share both personal and academic support.

Manage your content

- As a coursework student you will need to understand and master your content quickly. Developing strategies for faster reading and writing may help you manage your content more effectively.
- Use **reading strategies** such as skimming, scanning, and reading critically, and techniques such as annotating, strategically highlighting and taking useful notes to aid in understanding and using given texts. Practice these skills to improve reading comprehension and efficiency.
- Knowing how **academic writing** is structured helps towards its understanding. Know the functions of abstracts, introductions, thesis statements, conclusions and topic sentences and use them as keys to getting the most from your reading.
- Establish **limits for your content**. Try as soon as possible to select the issue or question you wish to focus on rather than continuing to address general topics. Try to focus your topic and set some boundaries. Remember, quality and depth of discussion is preferable to a broad overview.
- Become familiar with **technical language**. Academic writing is for a specific audience. As such it may contain words, concepts and principles that are new, specialised and sometimes technical. Have a place (either a book or a computer file) to list unfamiliar concepts or technical vocabulary to help you become familiar with new information in your area of study.
- Develop systems to **manage your information**. For example use **EndNote** or another application to keep track of references. Use a diary to record thoughts and ideas, or to keep notes on supervisory meetings.
- **Work collaboratively**. Develop reading or discussion groups where you can discuss topical issues, assessment tasks and research articles. This will help you understand new ideas, listen to alternate views or experiences, and share experiences of postgraduate study.

Know the academic style required

A coursework program often requires you to present work in a range of academic styles, for example: essays, reports, literature reviews, case studies, reflective writing, proposals, articles, research reports and theses. You must become familiar with the academic requirements of these styles.

Clarify the expectations of each task as these may differ between lecturers. Check if **examples of past work** are available. Be aware of **what** articles are saying **and how** they are written, noting the format, style and terminology used. **Get feedback** on your writing prior to submission. Know the **referencing style** required for each piece of work submitted.

Use the resources and services available to you

Attend as many **orientation and support classes** as possible, such as those provided by the Melbourne School of Graduate Research. Access class information and resources located on the Web and find out if there are any chat groups that you may be able to access.

You may also have access to either a dedicated or a shared **space at the university**; check these out. Make sure your workstation is ergonomically suited to your individual needs and that your desk is well organised and easy for you to use.

If you have academic problems talk to your **lecturers** and **tutors**. They will discuss academic expectations and provide guidance and feedback on your class work and assignments; however, they will not know that you require assistance unless you let them know. You must take responsibility for your learning. If your course includes a minor thesis your **supervisor** will be able to offer individual contact, ongoing feedback and individual attention to your work. A good working relationship and clear communication are the keys to good supervision.

Additional support services:

MSGR (Melbourne School of Graduate Research); University **IT** services; **Library** classes; **Counselling** services; **Academic Skills**; **GSA** (Graduate Student Association) and **Health / Childcare** services.

Further resources

Evans, D. & Gruba, P. (2002). *How to write a better thesis*. 2nd edition. Carlton South: Melbourne University Press.

Larcombe, W., Bussey, F., McCosker A., & Baik, C. (2006). Coursework or cursework? Issues, strategies and tips for postgraduate coursework students. *Post Graduate Review*, 11(1).

Academic Skills