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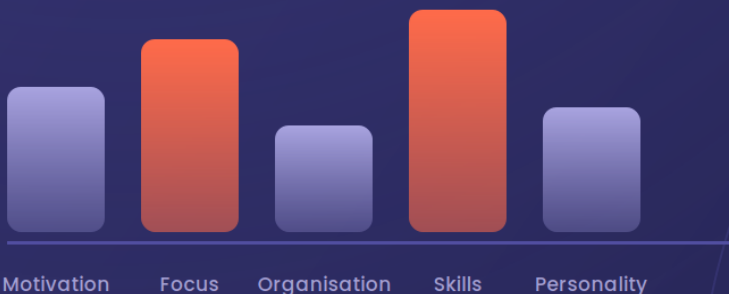
FREE STUDENT GUIDE

How to Study in Years 10, 11 and 12

*A practical guide to studying smarter —
for HSC, VCE, QCE, WACE and SACE students*

Dr Prue Salter

Study skills specialist · 30 years with Australian schools



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Prue Salter is one of Australia's most experienced study skills educators, with over thirty years working with secondary and university students, teachers and schools across the country. She has delivered thousands of study skills seminars and workshops, and is the author of multiple study skills resources used in schools nationwide.

Prue is co-founder of Studygram — a personalised learning profile and study skills diagnostic for Years 10–12 — which she developed alongside a team of educational psychologists, learning specialists, executive coaches and school practitioners.

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A note from Prue

I've spent thirty years watching students work incredibly hard. Long hours at the desk, notes covered in highlighting, past papers stacked on the floor. And yet — so many of them still feel like they're not getting the results their effort deserves.

In almost every case, the problem isn't effort. It's approach.

Most students study the way they were once told to study, or the way their friends study, or the way that simply feels familiar — without ever stopping to ask whether that approach actually suits them. And working that out on your own is genuinely difficult. Nobody hands you a manual for your own mind.

That gap between effort and insight is where so much potential gets lost.

This guide is my attempt to start closing it. Not with generic tips you've heard before, but with a practical framework for understanding how you learn — and how to build study habits that work for you specifically.

The students who do best in Years 10 to 12 aren't always the most naturally gifted. They're usually the ones who've worked out how to study smarter in the way that suits them best. My goal is to help you do the same.

— Dr Prue Salter

SECTION ONE

Why most study advice doesn't work for you

If you've ever followed study advice and found it didn't help, it's probably not that you were doing it wrong. The advice may simply not have been right for you.

Most study tips are written for a generic student. *Review your notes within 24 hours. Make flashcards. Study in a quiet room.* None of that is wrong, exactly. But it assumes you already know which tips will work for you — and there's no reason you would.

Research in educational psychology consistently shows that students differ meaningfully in:

- How they process and retain new information
- How long they can focus before their concentration drops away
- What kind of environment helps them think clearly
- Whether they work better alone or alongside others
- How they respond to pressure and manage stress
- What motivates them to keep going when the work gets hard

These aren't quirks to be ignored. They're real differences in how students engage, sustain effort and organise themselves — and following a plan built for someone nothing like you is a slow way to get nowhere.

KEY INSIGHT

Studying harder is rarely the answer. Studying in a way that matches how you learn is. The first step is understanding yourself as a learner — which is exactly what this guide is designed to help you do.

A word about "learning styles"

You may have been told at some point that you're a visual learner, or an auditory learner, or a kinaesthetic one. It's worth knowing that this idea — usually called *learning styles* — has been tested extensively, and the evidence doesn't support it. Being taught in your supposed "style" doesn't reliably improve results.⁴

So why does this guide talk about differences between learners at all? Because the differences that *do* matter aren't about which sense you prefer. They're about motivation, focus, organisation, technique and temperament — things that genuinely shape how well your study time converts into results.

The problem with the "top student" myth

There's a story many students tell themselves: that the ones getting top marks are simply smarter. Occasionally true. Far more often, they've found strategies that suit them and built habits around them — and habits and strategies are things anyone can develop.

SECTION TWO

Understanding how you learn

Before we get to specific strategies, it's worth spending a moment on something more fundamental: understanding yourself as a learner.

Over years of working with students, I've come to think about learners in terms of five key dimensions — areas where students differ meaningfully from one another, and where those differences have a real impact on how they should approach their study.

The five dimensions of learning

1 Motivation

What drives you to engage with your learning — and what causes you to switch off? Some students are driven by achievement and high standards. Others are motivated by curiosity, by rewards, by social connection, or by seeing a meaningful purpose behind what they're learning.

Ask yourself: what makes me want to begin a task and keep going when it becomes difficult? Do I respond best to goals, interest, recognition, working with others, or understanding why the learning matters?

2 Focus

How well can you direct your attention, sustain your effort and manage distractions? Some students concentrate deeply for long stretches. Others work best with variety, movement, shorter tasks or regular breaks. Neither is better — they're simply different ways of focusing.

Ask yourself: when is my concentration strongest? What tends to distract me, and what conditions help me stay mentally engaged?

3 Organisation

How do you manage your time, workload, deadlines and study resources? Some students naturally plan well ahead and enjoy structure. Others prefer flexibility, work best closer to deadlines, or need support turning good intentions into consistent action.

Ask yourself: do I usually know what needs to be done and when? Do I work steadily over time, or do I tend to rely on last-minute energy?

4 Study Skills

How well do you understand and apply effective study techniques? Some students regularly use strategies such as self-testing, practice questions and spaced revision. Others spend a great deal of time studying but rely mainly on passive methods – rereading, highlighting or copying out notes.

Ask yourself: am I actively testing what I know, or simply reviewing information? Do my study methods help me remember and apply what I've learned?

5 Personality

How does your personality shape the way you learn, work with others and respond to pressure? Some students are independent and driven; others learn best through connection and collaboration. Some prefer structure and consistency; others are energised by freedom, variety and new challenges.

Ask yourself: do I prefer to work independently or with others? How do I respond to feedback, setbacks, pressure and change?

REFLECTION

Take a moment to think about a time when you studied well – when the content came easily and you felt in the zone. What were the conditions? What time of day was it? Where were you? Were you alone? What method were you using?

Now think about a time when studying felt impossible. What was different?

The answers to those questions are the beginning of understanding how you learn.

SECTION THREE

Building a study system that works for you

Once you have a clearer sense of how you learn, the next step is building study habits that reflect it. A study system isn't a rigid timetable you force yourself to follow. It's a set of practices that make good study the path of least resistance.

Start with your non-negotiables

Every student has different commitments — sport, part-time work, family responsibilities, co-curricular activities. Before you plan your study, map your week honestly. Identify the windows where you genuinely have both the time and the energy to study well.

How many hours should you actually study?

This is the question I'm asked more than any other, and students are usually disappointed by the answer: there isn't a magic number. What there is, reliably, is a point of diminishing returns — and most students hit it far earlier than they think.

Two hours of quality, focused study will almost always produce better results than five hours of distracted, exhausted going-through-the-motions. Fewer hours, done well, beats more hours done badly. If you're going to compare yourself to anyone, compare the *quality* of your study sessions, not their length.

A more useful question than "how many hours?" is "how much did I actually retrieve, produce or practise today?" That number is much harder to inflate.

How to make a study timetable you'll actually follow

Most study timetables fail for the same reason: they're built for an idealised version of you who never gets tired, never has a late finish at work, and never wants to see their friends.

- **Block your fixed commitments first.** School, work, sport, travel, family. What's left is your real available study time — usually less than you assumed.
- **Assign subjects to slots, not just "study".** A slot labelled "study" invites you to pick whatever feels easiest. A slot labelled "Chemistry — practice questions, Module 5" doesn't.
- **Build in the harder subjects when your energy is highest.** For most students that's earlier rather than later, but yours may differ — this is exactly where knowing your own focus pattern pays off.
- **Leave deliberate empty space.** A timetable with no slack collapses the first time something goes wrong. Slack is what lets you recover instead of abandoning the whole plan.
- **Review it at the end of each fortnight.** If you never followed a particular slot, the slot is wrong, not you. Move it.

The planning–doing trap

A common trap I see students fall into is spending their study time planning to study rather than actually studying. Colour-coding timetables, reorganising notes, rewriting summaries — these can feel productive, but if they're taking the place of active learning, they aren't helping.

A rough rule of thumb: spend no more than 10% of your study time on planning and organising. The other 90% should be active engagement with the material.

Should you study alone or with friends?

Both work, for different things and different people. Study groups are genuinely useful for explaining concepts aloud, testing each other and comparing approaches to a question. They're poor for first-pass learning of new content, and they're a disaster if the group is really a social occasion wearing a lanyard.

A practical split: learn alone, test together. And be honest with yourself about which one your "study session" actually was.

Active versus passive study

This is probably the most important distinction in all of study skills, and the one that makes the biggest difference to results.

Passive study *feels* like studying: reading over notes, highlighting text, rewatching a recorded lesson. But it produces surprisingly little learning, because your brain isn't being required to do anything with the information.¹

Active study requires your brain to retrieve, apply or transform the information:

- Testing yourself with practice questions — with the book closed
- Writing summaries from memory, then checking what you missed
- Teaching the concept to someone else, or out loud to yourself
- Making connections between topics and identifying patterns
- Applying theory to practice problems and past exam papers

If your study feels easy and comfortable, it's probably passive. The slight discomfort of not being sure of the answer — and then working to find it — is where most of the learning happens.³

TRY THIS TODAY

After every study session, write down from memory — without looking at your notes — the three most important things you learned. If you can't do it, you haven't learned them yet, and you know exactly where to start next session.

SECTION FOUR

Five study techniques that actually work

The research on learning is unusually clear about which strategies produce durable, transferable knowledge. These aren't techniques I've invented — they're supported by decades of cognitive science.¹ The catch is that the most effective strategies often feel harder than the less effective ones, which is precisely why students abandon them.

1. Retrieval practice

Also known as: active recall, self-testing

Testing yourself — trying to pull information out of memory rather than putting it back in — is one of the most powerful learning strategies available. Every time you successfully retrieve something, you strengthen your ability to retrieve it again.²

IN PRACTICE

Close your notes and write down everything you can remember about a topic. Use flashcards. Complete past exam papers under timed conditions. Do this regularly throughout the year, not just before exams.

2. Spaced practice

Also known as: spaced repetition, distributed practice

Studying material across several shorter sessions spread over time is significantly more effective than one long cramming session. Your brain consolidates memories during rest and sleep, so returning to material after a gap works better than hammering it repeatedly in one sitting.⁵

IN PRACTICE

When you finish a topic, revisit it briefly a day later, then a week later, then at widening intervals before your exam. Each revisit takes less time than the last and leaves a stronger trace.

3. Interleaving

Also known as: mixed practice

Rather than studying one topic exhaustively before moving to the next, mix different topics or problem types within a single session. It feels harder and more confusing in the moment — and produces noticeably better long-term retention, plus the ability to work out *which* method a question calls for.⁶

IN PRACTICE

Instead of twenty questions on one type of equation, do twenty mixed questions where you have to identify the type first. This is closer to what an exam actually asks of you.

4. Elaborative interrogation

Also known as: asking "why?"

When you meet a new piece of information, ask yourself *why is this true?* and *how does this connect to what I already know?* Linking new information to existing knowledge is how your brain builds durable understanding rather than fragile memorisation.

IN PRACTICE

After reading a paragraph of notes, look away and explain the "why" behind it in your own words. If you can't, you've found a gap.

5. Concrete examples

Also known as: exemplification

Abstract concepts become far easier to remember when attached to concrete, specific examples — ideally ones you generate yourself rather than ones you were given.

IN PRACTICE

Studying a concept in economics? Think of a real business where you've seen it play out. Studying history? Find a parallel in something you already know well.

AND WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Highlighting, rereading and copying out notes are the three most popular study techniques among students — and among the least effective when used on their own.¹ They aren't forbidden. They're just not study. Treat them as preparation for the real work, not a substitute for it.

SECTION FIVE

Focus, distraction and procrastination

Knowing the right techniques doesn't help much if you can't get yourself to the desk. This is the part of study skills students are most embarrassed about and least often taught.

Why you procrastinate

Procrastination is rarely laziness. Much more often it's avoidance of an uncomfortable feeling — not knowing where to start, fear of doing it badly, or a task so vague that your brain can't get traction on it.

That's why "study Biology" sits untouched on a to-do list for a week while "do questions 1–10 on page 84" gets done. Vague tasks are procrastination fuel. Specific ones aren't.

Make the first step embarrassingly small

The hardest part of any study session is the first two minutes. So make the first two minutes trivially easy: open the book to the right page. Write the date and the topic at the top of a page. Do one question.

Starting is a separate skill from working, and it's the one worth practising. Most students find that once they're three minutes in, the resistance has quietly disappeared.

Your phone is the whole problem

I'll be blunt about this, because students consistently underestimate it. A phone in the room degrades your concentration even when you don't touch it — the mental effort of not checking it is itself a cost.

- Put the phone in a different room, not just face-down on the desk
- If you need it for music, use a device that can't message you, or an app-blocker with a timer
- Schedule your checking — a five-minute check between study blocks is fine and far better than a running trickle

Work out your natural session length

Some students focus well for 45 minutes; others fade at 20. Neither is a character flaw. Time yourself over a week and find out where your attention genuinely drops off, then build your blocks around that number rather than around whatever number someone on the internet recommended.

TRY THIS TODAY

Take the vaguest item on your to-do list and rewrite it as a specific action with a page number, a question range or a word count attached. Notice how much less resistance you feel towards the rewritten version.

SECTION SIX

Managing stress, pressure and exam nerves

I want to be honest about something: the stress students feel in Years 10 to 12 is real, and it's significant. Pretending otherwise doesn't help anyone. But there's a great deal you can do to manage it so that it doesn't derail your performance.

What stress actually does

A moderate level of stress and pressure can genuinely improve performance — it sharpens focus, raises energy and signals to your brain that what you're doing matters. The problem is chronic, unmanaged stress, which starts to interfere with sleep, memory consolidation and decision-making.

The goal isn't to eliminate stress. It's to keep it at a level where it's working for you rather than against you.

Practical strategies

- **Sleep is non-negotiable.** Memory consolidation happens while you sleep.⁷ An all-nighter before an exam trades short-term alertness for significantly worse recall — a bad deal on every occasion.
- **Schedule breaks deliberately** — not as a reward for finishing, but as a planned part of how you study.
- **Move.** Physical movement resets your nervous system. Even a ten-minute walk between sessions makes a measurable difference to how well you think.
- **Identify your triggers early.** Is it running out of time? Not understanding a topic? Comparing yourself to others? Knowing your triggers lets you plan around them instead of being ambushed.
- **Talk to someone.** Not necessarily a counsellor, though that's always an option. Sometimes just articulating what you're anxious about to a friend or parent loosens its grip.

What to do the night before an exam

Do a brief, light review of key concepts — an hour at most. Then stop. Eat a proper meal. Go to bed at your normal time.

Your brain needs rest to perform, and the anxiety-fuelled midnight cramming session will reliably cost you more than it gives you. Whatever you haven't learned by 9pm the night before, you're not going to learn between 11pm and 1am. What you *can* still control is arriving rested.

IF THINGS FEEL LIKE MORE THAN EXAM STRESS

Everything above is about ordinary academic pressure. If what you're feeling is heavier or more persistent than that, please talk to someone you trust — a parent, a teacher, your school counsellor or your GP. In Australia you can also contact Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800 or Lifeline on 13 11 14, at any hour.

SECTION SEVEN

Years 10, 11 and 12: what to focus on

Each year of senior secondary has a different centre of gravity, and it's worth thinking about them separately.

YEAR 10

Build the foundations

Year 10 is the most underrated year of the senior journey. Students who use it to develop genuine study habits — rather than just scraping through — arrive in Year 11 with a real advantage.

This is the year to experiment: try different study methods, work out when you concentrate best, identify which subjects need the most work and which come naturally. The stakes are lower, which makes it the ideal time to take risks with your approach.

- Start using a planner or task management system now, not in Year 12
- Practise writing under timed conditions in every subject
- Ask for feedback on your work — and take it seriously
- Build foundational knowledge everywhere; Year 12 content sits directly on top of it

YEAR 11

Develop your system

Year 11 is where the workload steps up sharply and where many students hit their first real wall. The ones who navigate it well are those who have a system rather than just good intentions.

This is the year to get serious about understanding how you study best, and to build the consistent habits that will carry you through Year 12.

- Identify your two or three hardest subjects and give them disproportionate time
- Study as you go — review regularly rather than waiting for exam time
- Build relationships with your teachers; they are your most valuable resource
- Review your approach each term: what's working, and what isn't?

Execute with confidence

By Year 12 you should have a clear picture of how you learn best. This is the year for fine-tuning and for executing the system you've built.

The students who do best in Year 12 are usually not the ones who study the most hours. They're the ones who study with the most clarity about what they need to do and how they need to do it.

- Front-load your revision — don't leave it all until final exams
- Use practice exams as genuine diagnostic tools, not just rehearsals
- Protect your sleep, exercise and social connections; they aren't luxuries
- Remember that your ATAR is one data point, not your destiny

WHICHEVER YEAR YOU'RE IN, START HERE

Don't try to change everything at once. Pick **one** thing from your year's list above and one technique from Section Four, and run both for a fortnight before you judge them.

Two changes made properly will do more for your results than ten changes attempted for three days each — and once they've become automatic, you have room to add the next one.

SECTION EIGHT

Where to go from here

Everything in this guide has been written for a student I haven't met — which means some of it will fit you well, and some of it won't apply to the way you work at all.

The real question isn't *what are the best study strategies?* It's *which approaches are the best fit for me?* And answering that properly takes more than a list of tips. It takes genuine self-knowledge.

Start with the five dimensions in Section Two. Work through them honestly — with a parent, a teacher or a friend if that helps. Then pick two techniques from Section Four and use them consistently for a fortnight before you judge them. Two techniques applied properly will do more for you than ten techniques sampled once.

And if you'd like a much more precise picture than self-reflection alone can give you, that's what we built Studygram to provide.

Discover your personal learning profile

Studygram is a research-backed learning profile and study skills diagnostic for students in Years 10–12.

You complete a short online assessment — most students finish in about 30 minutes — and receive an interactive dashboard showing exactly how you think, focus and learn across the five dimensions in this guide. Each dimension comes with personalised, practical strategies matched to your specific profile.

It isn't a generic list of tips. With over 5,000 possible profile combinations, your Studygram is genuinely yours.

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APPENDIX

Further reading

The strategies in Section Four are drawn from the following research. If you'd like to read further, most of these papers are freely available online.

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