

The Stress-free Guide to Studying at University

A Student's Guide Towards a Better Life

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Assessment: coursework, exams and stress

(or, How can I do better with less hassle?)

Preventing stresses where possible; learning how the assessment process works. Exam nerves and coursework stressors. Extenuating circumstances; what to do if life events are affecting your work. Handling the outcomes; what to do with unexpectedly good results, unexpectedly bad results and expected results.

Throughout your university life, you will encounter various forms of coursework and exams. These cause a lot of stress to a lot of students. Sometimes the stress comes from uncertainty about what the results will be; sometimes, it takes the form of exam nerves or writer's block; sometimes, it comes after the results are posted, in the form of bad results when you thought you had done really well. There are a few classic sources of grief which come from the first written work and the first exams, most of which arise from not knowing where the differences are between the expectations at school and the expectations at university. Most students learn the differences pretty quickly when they see the results of their first exams and the first coursework, but that isn't much consolation if you're coming up to those first exams and first coursework and are stressed out of your mind by the uncertainty. There are also classic stresses associated with the final exams; many courses include final year projects, which similarly have their own set of classic stresses. We'll start as usual with prevention.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

A major cause of stress is uncertainty, not knowing what to expect. A second major cause of stress is feeling powerless, believing you can't affect what is going to happen. A third cause is feeling ignorant; you feel as if academic life

is like a game with lots of complex rules, which everybody else knows but you don't. This section tackles these issues.

Coursework and exams: the background

By the time you've reached university, you'll already have a lot of experience of coursework and exams. That's in some ways a good thing, and in some ways a bad thing. It's good because you'll be familiar with assessment. It's bad because there are some crucial differences between school expectations and university expectations. Unfortunately, it's unlikely that anyone will tell you the differences unless you ask. The result is two types of potential stress.

The first type of potential stress comes from knowing that there are important differences, but not knowing what they are. The second type comes from thinking that you do know what the differences are, or not believing that there are any, and then getting an unpleasant surprise when the marks come out. One variant on this theme is a recurrent problem for mature students entering academia from the world of work; these students are often very good at business writing or business research, and then hit big problems when they discover that there are big differences between good business writing or good business research and good academic writing and research. Knowing about the differences won't prevent stress, but it will reduce it, and it should prevent that horrible feeling of playing a game where you don't know the rules. It's also useful to know that you're not alone – the majority of first term students are in this situation. The accompanying text box gives an informal and approximate guide to markers' likely reactions to common types of answer. (Warning: it's unlikely that your university will use this precise format, so it's wise to ask your lecturers for the actual marking scheme for their modules.)

At this point, you might be wondering about the issue of differences between markers' expectations in first year and final year assessment, which we mentioned earlier. This is an important issue in most disciplines, but different disciplines have different ways of interpreting it, so your best strategy is to find out the situation in your discipline. One simple method is to get your long-suffering student representatives to ask the lecturers to give your group some guidance on this. As a rough rule of thumb, the further you go through your university life, the more you're expected to take the initiative. You might get away with just reading the set texts in your first year, but by the time you reach your final year you'll be expected to read other material as well as using your own judgement and initiative. This other material will often include journal articles and chapters in specialised books, rather than material written specifically for students.

A rough guide to marking schemes

0–30%:	Straight fail. This answer shows no evidence that the student has ever attended the lectures or read anything about the topic; an intelligent passer-by could have written this answer using general knowledge and a couple of technical terms.
30–40%:	Has probably attended a few lectures or read a bit of a textbook, but that's just a guess. Only limited evidence of having put in any work or of understanding the topic.
40%:	Scrape pass. Has shown just enough evidence of learning to be allowed through.
40–50%:	Has grasped the general idea; fairly harmless, but not someone you'd show off to an important visitor.
50–60%:	Okay; has a fair grasp of the topic and has done a reasonable amount of work.
60–70%:	Good. Has a good grasp of the topic, or has worked hard, but probably not both.
70%–80%:	Excellent. Really understands the topic well, has worked hard and intelligently, with good original insights.
80%–100%:	Outstanding; has worked hard, and read widely and intelligently. I wish I'd thought of some of the points in this answer.

Classic stressors in first year assessment are uncertainty about expectations, and sometimes unpleasant surprises when the assessment results are significantly worse than expected. There's some advice about these topics towards the end of this chapter, and you might find it useful to read the sections in Chapter 2 on handling uncertainty and on unexpected bad experiences. Another common source of stresses on many courses is the final year project or dissertation, which is based around independent work helped by a supervisor. This is a book-sized topic in its own right; one useful strategy is to read one of the many books about doing your undergraduate project, and another is to persuade the member of staff responsible for projects to have a drop-in session where people can ask questions that they're too embarrassed to ask in public. A key thing is to remember that your supervisor is there to give you guidance and act as a mentor; if you keep that in mind, then they should be the best source of advice and reassurance.

Clashing deadlines

In an ideal world, there would be a reasonable interval between the due dates for each piece of coursework in a semester, and your lecturers would never suffer from human frailty. The reality is different. Why is this, and what can you do about it? Deadlines clash because the number of modules

being assessed across the university is usually larger than the number of possible due dates, and quite a few of those modules will be affected by factors outside the lecturers' control. The number of interactions, knock-on effects and suchlike for students doing joint honours is so large that it's usually not feasible to co-ordinate dates except for the two or three most common modules on a given course. Where does this leave you as a student? It leaves you knowing that the problem will almost certainly hit you sooner or later, so it's wise to prepare for it. It also leaves you knowing that this is a problem largely outside the control of the individual lecturers, so there's usually not much point in wasting energy complaining about it. You're better off saving your strength for battles that you are more likely to win. Here are some strategies that can help.

Try to prevent clashing dates

There's a fair chance that you can prevent clashing dates for at least the most common combinations of modules. A good way is to do this via the student representatives for your year. As soon as you know the due date for the coursework from the first of the commonly shared modules, you can ask your student representatives to contact the lecturers on those other modules, passing on that date, and asking politely if they could avoid setting their own deadlines on that date. This is particularly useful to lecturers if the modules involved are in different departments, with which they don't normally have much contact. In an ideal world, the lecturers would be doing this by themselves, but it's not an ideal world, and if you take initiative politely along these lines, you might be able to make everyone's lives a bit better.

Plan backwards

A classic cause of stress is discovering that the communal printers are all queued solid at the point where you want to print off your coursework. Most people leave things till the last minute, and this leads to last-minute queues; it also often leads to equipment breaking down because of overload. It's a good strategy to set yourself a personal deadline a few days before the official one, and then plan your time backwards from that. Even if you over-run by a couple of days on your personal deadline, you'll still be finished by the due date. A related issue is to keep backups; a lot of students lose their work just before the deadline because of hard disk crashes and suchlike.

Plan your time

Sometimes it's better to do one piece of coursework first and another second; other times, it's better to switch between them. A good strategy is to sit down with a piece of paper or a spreadsheet, and work out which things you'll need to do for which coursework. For example, if one piece of work depends

on something that you'll need to order, such as an inter-library loan, then it makes sense to put that order in as early as possible, and then spend time on the other coursework until the item arrives. It's also a good idea to schedule in some rest time and some spare time, so that when something over-runs, you can absorb that in the scheduled spare time.

Useful strategies for handling the academic issues in assessment

Read the instructions in the coursework/exam questions; they're not just the examiner's opinion

A surprisingly high proportion of students don't read the instructions at the start of the coursework or exam properly, and proceed to answer a question that was never asked in the first place. This usually leads to a bad mark or a fail, since you're marked against what you were asked to do, not what you decided to write about. Something to be careful about is an automatic reaction to a particular phrase, regardless of context. So, for example, computer science students who see the word 'website' often jump straight into designing a website, even if the coursework specifically states that they should not design a website. It's wise to read the instructions, do something else for a while, and then re-read them slowly to check that you really do understand what's required. If you're not sure, then ask the lecturer or exam invigilator politely for clarification.

Plan your answer

Being keen to start and to get the assessment out of the way is understandable, but jumping straight into the answer is not the best strategy. It's wise to remember what you're being marked on. You're normally being marked on what you write, which is true, relevant and, most importantly, not known to everyone on the street. A lot of students suffer needless grief and perplexity because of that last criterion. It's a particularly common problem for mature students and for students coming into academia from industry. In the outer world, it's usually considered desirable to write plain English with as few technical terms, references and 'ifs and buts' as possible. That's understandable. However, you don't get a degree just for having general knowledge. The university assumes that you have general knowledge anyway as your starting point; the purpose of academic assessment is to find out how much specialist knowledge you have gained about a topic, above and beyond what is known by people on the street. The way to show that knowledge is via precisely the things that are normally shunned in writing outside academia – references, technical terms, 'ifs and buts' and so forth, as explained above. When you're planning your answer, therefore, it's important to think about how to demonstrate your academic skills in the answer.

The markers can only give you marks for what you write on the page, so you need to get it there. One useful strategy is to do a first rough outline of your answer based on general knowledge. After you've done that, you then go through the outline, making sure to include things that demonstrate your academic knowledge and which need to be included in the answer – technical terms, references, mention of rare cases that need to be considered, and so on. It's also advisable to think about whether the obvious structure for the answer is in fact the correct one. Sometimes the professional's response is very different from the 'general knowledge' response. The same issue applies to examination answers.

Once you've done the pre-final draft, it's a good idea to use the highlighter test. This involves printing off a hard copy, then going through it with a highlighter, highlighting phrases and sentences which could not have been written by a member of the general public (references, specialist terms, 'ifs and buts' and so forth). These are usually the parts which get you the marks, since they demonstrate what you have learned through being on the module. As a rough rule of thumb, the more highlighter, the better your chance of a decent mark. After the highlighter test, you can help yourself further by checking the regulations about format, presentation and so on, to ensure that your work follows the regulations. If you've word-processed your answer, as is usual with coursework, then you should also apply the spell-checker. If there's time, you might be able to persuade a friend with a good grasp of spelling to check for errors that the spell-checker will miss (such as 'there' for 'their') in exchange for some chocolates or equivalent. If you happen to be good at spelling, and have already done your coursework, then you might be able to build up a decent-sized chocolate stash by offering your services in this way. (Important note: if you're going down this route, remember to check the regulations about collusion, in other words, unfair collaboration. Most institutions allow you to have your spelling and punctuation checked in this way, though they also usually require you to state in writing that you have done this; they do not usually allow your mate with good spelling to give you advice about factual errors.)

Extenuating circumstances: practical solutions

Gordon was once involved in the case of a student who diffidently asked whether the examiners could make any allowance for the fact that he'd recently had an operation on his spine, and had written his exam answers standing up, leaning the paper against a wall, because he had steel plates in his back which prevented him from sitting down. The university system, whatever its imperfections, does at least have mechanisms for taking account of any external events that might reasonably be expected to affect your marks, and in this case the examiners did make appropriate allowance

(they would have also given the student a medal if they'd been allowed to). This process goes by different names in different universities, but is usually some variation on 'extenuating circumstances.' If you've had an accident or bereavement, or been ill, or been a victim of crime, or any of the other unpleasant things that life throws at human beings, then the system can make allowance for it, provided that you let the system know officially.

The usual way of doing this is via filling in a form. This may come across as a cold-blooded bureaucratic example of adding insult to injury, but that's not the intention. The intention is to prevent unscrupulous individuals abusing the system by claiming extenuating circumstances to make up for having done no work for the last year. One of the depressing things about being on examination boards is the number of cases where students have made up tear-jerking stories of extenuating circumstances which turn out to be untrue. One of the encouraging things about the exam boards is the amount of helpfulness they usually show to those students who are genuine cases. However, they need some way of knowing who is a genuine case, which is where the procedures come in.

If you have extenuating circumstances, then talk to the appropriate member of staff, and fill in the appropriate form. The precise details vary between universities; if in doubt, ask someone knowledgeable and approachable on the staff. The key thing is that you'll need to supply some evidence to confirm that your story is true. That's something that often worries students, but the system has ways of handling difficult cases. If the extenuating circumstance is something you really don't want to talk about, then there are usually procedures for handling this. For example, most exam boards will accept a letter from a doctor or counsellor which says that you've been through a traumatic event, without saying anything about what that event was. Similarly, if you're a victim of crime, then the police can supply documentation to show that you've reported a crime which is under investigation. The key point is to help the system to help you. If you suffer in silence, you'll suffer once from the event, and then suffer again from being academically assessed without any allowance for the event. Talk to someone, and then they can help you through. None of these things on its own will prevent stress, but each of them improves your chances, and gives you more control. The next section looks at exams, and ways of handling them.

Handling assessment: exam nerves and writer's block

Exam nerves

If you suffer from exam nerves, you're not alone. A lot of other students go through the same problem. It affects students right across the spectrum, including the brightest and most able. Because it's so widespread, it's

received a lot of attention, and there are well-established and effective ways of tackling it, which will be well-known to the academic support people at your university. We describe some of these techniques in this section.

A lot of students don't seek help for exam nerves, and then feel guilty, stupid and inadequate because they haven't asked for help when it was available. There's a perfectly understandable reason for being in this situation. It's much the same dynamic as dealing with a phobia about, say, spiders. Asking for help with a spider phobia involves having to mention spiders. If you're phobic about them in the first place, then you're going to be understandably reluctant to start a process that is apparently all about the one thing you most dread. We say 'apparently' because the reality is rather different. The most widely used approach for tackling problems of this sort involves relaxation therapy, and this is based around taking things at a pace you're comfortable with. It's an extremely enjoyable sensation – a bit like lying in a comfortably hot bath, at peace with the world. It's usually fast – two or three hour-long sessions will quite probably be enough to transform your life radically for the better – and usually effective. If you're affected by exam nerves, then we strongly recommend that you talk to the student support people about it, preferably early in the term so that you have plenty of time to sort things out well before the assessment season. An added bonus is that once you've learned how to use this approach, you can apply it by yourself in other stressful situations; you can also use it in normal life to produce a feeling of calm well-being. The text box below contains some specific tips about ways of reducing or preventing stressful exam situations.

Before the exam

- Reconnoitre and get positive associations; scout out the usual examination room well in advance when it's empty, finding out where the crucial locations are (toilets, places where you can leave bags and coats, and so on). If possible, spend a few minutes there thinking positive thoughts (to give you some good associations with it).
- Plan in advance; decide how much time you're going to spend reading the questions and planning the questions.
- Make sure all your pens, pencils, and other stationery items are in good working order, and that you have spares in case something breaks.
- If you have exam nerves, plan your rewards you'll give yourself after the exam – a reward for going into the room, another reward for reading instructions and planning your answers, a big reward if you voluntarily do something that raises your pulse rate, like asking the invigilator for information; another big reward if you write an answer for every question and stay to the end.

(Continued)

During the exam

- If you have exam nerves, do your relaxation exercises for a couple of minutes when you have the opportunity.
- Read the rubric (instructions) carefully, twice. Make sure you know how many questions to answer, and which ones are compulsory.
- If exam nerves are still a problem, do your relaxation exercises for another couple of minutes. If you feel yourself tensing up at any point during the exam, do them again; it will be time well spent, and will help you get a better mark because you'll be working intelligently and purposefully.
- If you find exams a struggle, you can reward yourself during the exam by using positive imaging – imagining yourself on the beach, or out with your friends, or by self-praise – telling yourself how well you've done, or by relaxing your muscles for 30 seconds. Use these mini rewards after you have completed a part of the exam; after planning your timing, planning the answer to a question, or finishing a question. The idea is to associate doing the exam with positive, calming thoughts, rather than negative, stressful ones. Be careful not to be lured into daydreaming, though.
- Decide which questions you're going to do.
- Plan how long you're going to spend on each question. Budget in a few minutes of spare time.
- Plan your answer to each question, making sure you have at least something to say for each part of any multi-part questions.
- Make sure you've included technical terms, facts and references within each answer, to show that you know relevant things that an intelligent person on the street would not know.
- If you're not sure what a question means, ask the invigilator for clarification. The person who wrote the exam paper is on call during the exam, for precisely this sort of situation.
- If you'd prefer not to ask for clarification, then you can start your answer by writing down the possible interpretations, and saying which one you're using.
- After each question, check that you've done all the required parts of it. Don't leave any parts blank – even a sketchy answer to one part can be enough to tip you over the borderline. In a worst case, a few bullet points, a mind map or even your answer plan could be enough to get you over that borderline.

If you've planned rewards for yourself, and earned them by doing the required things, then make sure to give yourself those rewards afterwards; you'll have earned them.

Writer's block

Writer's block is when you try to write something and your brain stubbornly refuses to produce any usable words. It's not much fun at the best of times,

and it's less than wonderful if it strikes you in an exam or when you're rapidly approaching a coursework deadline. Fortunately, there's a lot of good guidance available on this problem, for the elegant reason that it's a particular problem for professional writers, who go on to write at great length about it once they've got over it. The suggestions below are a few of the main approaches, the first five of which you can use during an exam. Most of them aim to get you writing something, even if it's rubbish to start with; once you've broken the logjam, the quality of the writing usually improves. Even if it doesn't, you're still better off submitting something lacklustre than if you submitted blank paper. Don't forget to scrap the paper you've used to remove your writer's block. You would not want it to be handed in with your answers.

- Deliberately write something wrong, so that your subconscious comes raging out, telling you what you should have written instead.
- Write about something completely irrelevant, to get your subconscious started on producing something relevant instead.
- Draw a picture, such as a mind map or a line of boxes, where each box represents a section of what you're going to write. Label each box, and draw labelled arrows to show connecting themes between each section.
- Write five sentences summarising the main points you're going to make. Then write five sentences about each of the first five sentences.
- Imagine you are explaining the idea in a conversation with another student, or your parents, or some other figure who is not going to be judgemental about your answer. Make notes on what you said and use these as a framework for your written answer.
- Set up a line of sweets, and allow yourself to eat one for each line you write.
- If possible, go away and do a useful displacement activity, such as cleaning the grot out of the plughole in the bath. Your subconscious will probably soon feel motivated to sit at a nice clean keyboard and write some words.

Handling the aftermath

Usually, your assessment results will be pretty much what you're expecting. By the end of your degree, you'll have enough experience to predict fairly well what your grades will be in a given topic. With your first assessment, though, there's a lot more uncertainty, since you're now playing under different rules. Most people don't handle uncertainty well. If your results are better than you expected, then that's usually straightforward; if they're worse than you expected, though, that's often a very different story. So, what can you do about it?

The first thing is to have a strategy for dealing with the uncertainty. If it's stressing you a lot, then one effective strategy is to pour your energies into something useful which will take your mind off the waiting. If you can't face anything related to academia in the first couple of days after the assessment, then a useful displacement activity is a good second choice – for instance, catching up on washing and cleaning, or getting your diary up to date so you don't miss any birthdays among family and friends. The next thing is to have a strategy for dealing with the outcomes. It's not a good idea to think that you'll play it by ear after you've received the results. If the results are unexpectedly bad, then you're not going to be in much of a state to make big decisions. It's better to work out your plan A, plan B and plan C in advance, so that you know what you'll do for each of the possible outcomes. Make sure each plan has something positive going for it, rather than being a miserable second best. The following chapters give some more detailed suggestions about ways of handling this.

One question which occurs to most students is why the results take so long to come out; many students find themselves harbouring suspicions that their department is simply incapable of organising anything, or can't be bothered. The reality is that universities take assessment very seriously, with assessment time being a frenzy of activity. The assessment process, however, involves several stages of marking, checking the marking, making allowances for extenuating circumstances, and double-checking everything. After all of this has been done, then the marks are official and can be given to the students. As you might imagine, this takes some time. One way to think of it is that every day it takes for the results to come out is another day in which someone is sweating away to make sure that your work is marked properly.

Dealing with problems

Plan A: better results than expected

This is not usually a problem, but it's worth thinking about what to do if it happens. For instance, you might realise that there are possibilities now open to you that you had previously believed to be out of your reach; if so, do you want to go for those, or do you want to stick with your current goals?

Plan B: the results you expected

This is not usually a problem either, but can be if the results are not good ones, since it can restrict the opportunities open to you. It can also be a problem if well-meaning friends and acquaintances have assured you that you will do well, and are now embarrassed to find they were wrong. This is why you need a plan. Find out ahead of time about options open to you with

your less-than-ideal results, and you will feel more in control. Deal with your embarrassed friends by discussing your practical plans together. A reasonable treat is in order.

Plan C: worse results than you expected

We normally use a two-stage response. After we've checked that we haven't misread or misunderstood anything, and that the reality really is worse than expected, the first stage is to feel extremely sorry for ourselves for the rest of the day, and have a thorough wallow, to get the emotion out of our system. An emotional response is perfectly normal in such circumstances, and trying to stifle it or ignore it is unlikely to be helpful in the long run. If possible, we treat ourselves to an evening of comfort therapy; chocolate, a social drink, a favourite film, some relaxation and centring exercises (described in the appendices). Some people like to write a bit of fiction in which the person they consider responsible for the bad result suffers horribly (though if you do this, be sure to destroy the draft, or at least to make very sure that the offending individual cannot be identified; English law is pretty fierce on libel). There's a fine dividing line between a social drink and getting drunk. Getting drunk is not a good strategy; at best, it leaves you poorer and with a hangover the next morning, when you most need a clear head, and at worst you might do something extremely stupid while under the influence, and land yourself in a much worse situation – for instance, waking up in a police cell, or in hospital. With the reassurance and wallowing out of the way, it's time to move on to the second stage.

The second stage begins the next morning. It involves asking what you're going to do about this situation. You might have worked this out already, while waiting for the results. If you haven't, then this is the time to start. There are two main things to think about. One is how this affects you in purely administrative terms – what options are open to you and what options are closed. Another is what you can learn from this, with a view to growing as a person. One thing to check is what options the system offers you. This may seem blindingly obvious, but surprisingly few students check the regulations about this sort of thing in advance (or at any other point). It may be that a particular bad result is no impediment to where you want to go. If you have a scrape pass in a module where you were expecting a distinction, but you don't need any more than a scrape pass in that particular module to continue with your chosen path, then it may still be an unpleasant surprise to have the low mark, but it won't get in the way of what you want to do. You will usually have at least one opportunity to resit the piece of work. As usual, taking advice from a knowledgeable and approachable member of staff is usually a wise move. They'll have seen a lot of other students going through exactly the same thing, and will be able to help you

see the situation in perspective. They will also probably be able to suggest options that had not occurred to you. In theory, your personal tutor should be able to do this, but if you don't get on well with them, then you might want to ask someone else, such as student support services.

Moving on

The world is imperfect, and throws a lot of bad things at most people in the course of a lifetime. Most people make at least one huge mistake in their life. That's normal, and part of being a human being. It's important to measure yourself against a sensible standard. What good mentors and potential employers are interested in is not so much whether you make the occasional mistake, but what you do afterwards. Do you fall apart, or do you pick yourself up, learn from it, and move on as a wiser and more capable person?

At the time, failing an exam can feel like the end of the world. One way of putting it into context is to imagine that you've been flying home to tell your parents the bad news, and the plane has to do an emergency crash landing. You and the other passengers and crew survive and walk away unscathed from the tangled, burning wreckage. In that context, how important is the exam mark going to feel? Exam marks and coursework marks feel very important at the time because you're so close to them. In the greater scheme of things they are not so important, and are far from being the only factor determining whether or not you have a successful career or a happy life.

For example, failure in one subject may simply mean that you picked the wrong course. It is quite possible that you will be allowed to switch to a similar course, or even another degree entirely. You will need to discuss this with your tutor, who will be able to advise you on the course to choose and the steps you need to take.

You may still be able to achieve your original aims by an alternative route. For instance, say you're absolutely dead set on a PhD. You'll normally need an upper second or first class pass in your first degree to be accepted, but even that's not invariable; there are ways of demonstrating your ability after graduating with a lower second or a third, and getting onto a PhD via that route. So, significant findings from a final year research project, a groundbreaking investigation into a famous author's early life, undertaken in your spare time, or a project for an employer demonstrating your ability to tackle independent research, may be sufficient to convince a university to take you on to do a PhD.

Even if you are unable to complete your degree, it is not the end of the world, even if it may feel like it at the time. If you are unable to get the kind of job you originally wanted, think carefully about the alternatives. You may still be able to find a way into your chosen career, but by a different

route. Many prospective employers are more impressed by signs of initiative, capability and determination than by the class of degree you got, or whether you got one at all. Be aware that you will need to demonstrate that you do actually have initiative, capability and determination, by achieving something, not by simply telling a prospective employer that you have those qualities. A year on VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas), or carrying out a market research exercise for your local library, or refurbishing a women's refuge – activities relevant to the job you want, and which other people can testify to in a reference for you – will carry weight with most employers.

So, how do you learn the right lesson? One good starting place is to ask the module tutor to give you some suggestions about how to improve things. Listen, don't talk. It's tempting to try to persuade them that your answers in the exam or coursework were actually right, but it's highly unlikely that this is the case. More likely you've misunderstood something, so careful listening is the answer. Sometimes, it's simply the case that a particular topic is one that is not your strong point. We can't all be brilliant at everything; the qualities that make you good at one thing are often precisely the qualities that make you bad at another. It's a good idea to ask yourself whether you're playing to your strengths, and moving your life in the direction that's best suited for you. On that encouraging note, we'll move on to the next chapter.

SUMMARY

Most students find exams and coursework stressful. Few students systematically find out what is expected of them, and how best to handle assessment. A key principle is to get tangible evidence onto the page showing that you've learned things you didn't know before you started the module. If you have exam nerves, then there's good support available at all universities from the student support services. It's usually easy to treat exam nerves and phobias. Some time spent on this is likely to be one of the best investments you ever make.

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTED FURTHER RESOURCES

There are numerous books on study skills and exam techniques. We've listed three typical good examples.

A. Naik's *The Little Book of Exam Calm* (Hodder Children's Books, 2000); like all the Little Books, it's less than ten centimetres on a side, and easy to slip into a pocket or bag if you want to have some calming thoughts near to hand during the day. It contains numerous short, clear tips and thoughts for anyone worried about exams.

Dominic O'Brien's *How to Pass Exams: Accelerate Your Learning, Memorise Key Facts, Revise Effectively* (Duncan Baird Publishers, 2003) is popular, and has a lot about learning and revision techniques.

Dawn Hamilton's *Passing Exams: A Guide for Maximum Success and Minimum Stress* (Thomson Learning, 2003) covers similar ground, but with more emphasis on doing it with less stress.