
INTERNET LEARNERS

Study Better, Not Longer

An 8-page guide to studying in a way
that actually sticks

Four methods. One diagnosis. No folklore.

Laura Bill, M.A.

Educational Psychology • Certified DBT Coach

internetlearners.com

START HERE

Why Most Study Advice Fails

Almost everything you have been told about studying is folklore. Not malicious — just handed down, never tested, and repeated because it sounds sensible.

Here is the finding that reorganises everything else. When you reread material, it starts to feel familiar and easy. Your brain reads that ease as evidence that you know it. Researchers call this **fluency**, and it is a liar.

Retrieval — closing the book and producing the information from memory — feels like the opposite. Effortful, halting, faintly humiliating. And it is the thing that actually builds durable memory.

THE UNCOMFORTABLE RULE

The study session that felt smooth and reassuring probably did less. The one that felt effortful and slightly demoralising probably did more.

This guide is eight pages. You can read it in about ten minutes, and every method in it is something you can start tonight.

THE FOUNDATION

One Distinction Worth Knowing

In 1976, two Swedish researchers gave students an article and asked how they had gone about reading it. The answers split cleanly. One group had tried to remember the text. The other had tried to work out what the author was arguing.

They called these the **surface** and **deep** approaches, and the distinction has held up for five decades.

	Surface approach	Deep approach
Your intention	Reproduce the material	Understand the meaning
Your focus	The words and facts	What they point at
Typical method	Rereading, highlighting	Questioning, explaining
After a month	Little survives	Most of the structure

The crucial part, and the part popular writing gets wrong: **these are not two types of person.** They are approaches the same student switches between depending on workload, assessment, prior knowledge, and stress.

THE REFRAME

If you are memorising without understanding, the first question is not “what is wrong with me?” It is “what about my situation is making memorisation the rational choice?” That question usually has an answer, and the answer is usually fixable.

STEP ONE

Diagnose the Actual Problem

Before choosing a method, find out what is actually going wrong. When you get something wrong, there are only three reasons — and they need completely different responses.

What happened	How you know	What fixes it
You did not know it	You had never met the concept	Content review
You knew but could not apply it	Reading the answer, you think “I knew that”	Practice and reasoning
You misread the question	You answered something that was not asked	Slow down; restate first

THE MOST COMMON MISDIAGNOSIS

“I knew that” is the diagnostic phrase. If you say it while reviewing, more reading will not help you. The knowledge is there and is not reachable under pressure — which is a completely different problem.

Most people who feel stuck are in row two and treating it like row one. They read more, feel no better, and conclude they need to read even more.

STEP TWO

The Four Methods

There is no single best way to study. There are four, and the right one depends on what kind of material you are facing.

1. Retrieval practice with spaced review

For arbitrary material — terminology, values, vocabulary, names. Close the book, write what you remember, check. Then revisit on an expanding schedule: one day, three days, a week, two weeks.

2. Elaboration and teach-back

For concepts with structure underneath them. Explain the topic aloud to an imaginary beginner with no notes. Thirty seconds tells you whether you understand it or merely recognise it.

3. Interleaved practice

For exams testing judgment. Mix topics within a session instead of blocking them. It feels worse and performs better, because the hard part of a real exam is working out which idea applies — and blocked practice removes that step for you.

4. Structured group study

When starting is the real bottleneck. The operative word is structured. Everyone studies alone first; the session is for teaching each other and comparing reasoning, not for first reads.

CHOOSING BETWEEN THEM

The one-question test: if I understood the principle behind this, would the details follow? If yes, it is method two or three. If no, it is method one — memorise it efficiently and move on with a clear conscience.

STEP THREE

A Week That Works

A sample low-burnout week. Adjust the times; keep the shape.

Day	Session 1	Session 2
Mon	New material — read, then retrieve	Practice questions
Tue	Retrieve Monday's material	New material
Wed	Mixed practice (all topics)	Light review or rest
Thu	New material	Retrieve Tuesday's
Fri	Mixed practice	Teach one topic aloud
Sat	Weekly self-quiz — everything	Off
Sun	Off. Genuinely off.	This is part of the plan.

Three rules that matter more than the grid:

- **Sessions of 25–45 minutes**, then a real break. Not a phone break — that is different stimulation, not rest.
- **Every session starts with retrieval** of the last one. Two minutes. This is where spacing happens.
- **Protect the rest day.** Consolidation happens between sessions, especially during sleep. Studying seven days is not more studying.

STEP FOUR

Stop Doing These

Four popular activities with poor returns. Dropping them frees more time than any technique adds.

Rereading

Builds fluency with the page, not with the idea. The most common study activity and among the least effective.

Highlighting

Feels industrious, requires no retrieval, produces almost nothing. If you highlight, do it on a second pass and only to mark what you will later quiz yourself on.

Studying to your “learning style”

The claim that matching teaching to a preferred sensory style improves learning has been tested repeatedly and has not held up. Preferences are real; they just do not predict what you learn best from. Match the format to *the material* instead — diagram what is spatial, hear what is auditory, practise what is physical.

Marathon sessions

Below a certain level of rest, extra hours reduce what you retain. Four calm hours beat eight anxious ones, and that is a finding rather than encouragement.

A calm forty-five minutes beats an anxious four hours.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Your First Week

Do not implement all of this at once. Pick the smallest version and let it prove itself.

- **Tonight:** take one topic, close the book, and write what you remember. Check it. Notice the gap — that gap is your study plan.
- **This week:** replace one rereading session with retrieval, and explain one topic aloud with no notes.
- **Next week:** add spacing. Revisit each topic a day later, then three days, then a week.
- **Ongoing:** when something is not working, run the diagnosis on page 4 before adding hours.

ONE LAST THING

Give any new method two weeks before judging it. The methods that work feel harder than the ones that do not — which means your first impression will usually be wrong.

Free tools at internetlearners.com

- **Study Method Finder** — six questions, get the method matched to your material
- **Learning Approach Quiz** — find out whether you are studying surface, deep, or strategic
- **NCLEX Readiness Quiz** — for nursing students specifically

— Laura

Laura Bill holds an M.A. in Educational Psychology and is a Certified DBT Coach. This guide is educational and is not medical or psychological advice. Sources: Marton & Säljö (1976); Biggs & Tang (2011); Pashler et al. (2008); Brown, Roediger & McDaniel (2014).