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University



# Studying with Little or No Sight

This booklet accompanies the Skills for OU Study website:  
[www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy](http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy)

Skills for OU Study

Studying with  
Little or No Sight

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# Skills for OU Study

## Studying with Little or No Sight

More than a thousand blind and partially sighted people successfully study Open University courses each year. This guide will help you understand how to undertake a course if you have little or no sight. This guide aims to be an introduction to the topic.

More detailed information can be found on the [Skills for OU study](#) website and the [Services for Disabled Students](#) website.

This guide is available in Braille, on the web  
and as a DAISY talking book.





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# 1 Introduction

This guide is for Open University (OU) students whose sight is impaired. It acknowledges that you may face some challenges, helps you clarify what your own particular needs may be and includes tried and tested solutions to ensure you can study effectively with the OU.

Electronic versions of this guide include hyperlinks that you can select to jump to the relevant section in the document.

## 1.1 Finding more information



You will find additional OU resources on the [StudentHome](#) website (your student login details will be required), which includes links to Skills for OU Study, and the Careers Advisory Service. You will also find a link to Services for Disabled Students, which takes you to further information about support for blind and partially sighted students. This guide directs you to the appropriate sections within these sites to find the further information on OU study that is relevant to all students.

The appendices to this guide supply contact details for the equipment and sources of advice mentioned in the main text. This is contained in Sources of help and advice (Appendix 1) and Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

## 2 What does the OU mean by 'little or no sight'?

Do you experience vision-related restrictions in your life even with the help of any medical treatment, glasses or contact lenses? If so, they may have implications for how you study at the OU, and this guide has been written for you.

There are various terms to describe having little or no sight, probably the most common being 'visual impairment'.

Two categories of visual impairment are formally recognised through the UK registration process.

- Sight impaired (sometimes known as partially sighted).
- Severely sight impaired (also known as blind).

You may already be registered and have a card or letter to confirm this. Being registered can make it easier to obtain support and establish your eligibility for some financial benefits. The OU does not require you to be registered before it recognises your particular study requirements.

However, registration can simplify access to [Disabled Students Allowances](#) (DSA).



To find out more about registration visit the [RNIB](#) website.

# 3 OU study methods

OU students are provided with course materials in a variety of formats. Some are printed and arrive through the post, others may be available through the internet to download or use online. Many courses also use audio and video recordings, or interactive DVDs. Some courses have an online course forum where you can discuss your study and interact with other students, and tutorials may be conducted face to face or online. Students find that tutorials are a great opportunity to raise their own questions and difficulties, as well as to meet other people studying the course.

Since the methods used are combined with support from a tutor or a student adviser and the student services staff, the OU approach is called 'supported open learning'.

Blind and partially sighted students are able to access course materials in a variety of ways, as described in Accessible course materials (Section 4.3).

## 3.1 Study challenges

Most of the study challenges you'll face are exactly the same as those encountered by all OU students.

- You will need to be organised to make sure that you are working on the right course material and that you send in your assignments on time.
- You will have quite a lot of reading to do and will need to make notes.
- You will have assignments to plan and prepare.



Information and advice on dealing with these challenges is available online through [Skills for OU Study](#).



However, some methods of learning will be more difficult for you than for other students. Table 1 shows some of the situations and possible challenges you may experience. Follow the links in this table to find further information in this guide.

Context	Challenge
Managing course information	Being organised (Section 9); storing and retrieving materials
Studying course materials	Accessing material online and in print (Sections 4.3, 5 and 7); note-taking (Section 8)
Attending face-to-face tutorials	Note-taking and dealing with discussions (Section 8.2)
Taking part in an online tutorial or online forum	Using computers (Section 6) to read and write messages
Using course resources via computer	Navigating the computer screen (Section 6.1)
Attending residential or day school	Getting about, living away from home (Section 4.8)
Tutor-marked assignment (TMA)	Preparing written work using a computer (Sections 6 and 10)
Exam	Working under timed conditions (Section 11)

Table 1 Some of the challenges you might encounter while you study

## **Courses that pose particular challenges**

It is not our intention to put you off studying a particular course, but if your chosen course requires you to master some new or specialist form of access, such as a more powerful screen reader or a specific braille notation, then you are strongly advised to take time to become fluent with that first. Don't try to learn a new access solution at the same time as you attempt a course that relies on you being competent to access the materials.

Maths, science, computing, music and foreign language courses may pose specific access difficulties. The OU does provide written descriptions of diagrams, but it can be difficult or impossible to describe adequately elements such as graphs, diagrams and equations.

There may also be health and safety arrangements to consider, for example in connection with practical science work at a residential school.

Before studying a computing course you should acquire a good working knowledge of the access technologies that suit your needs.

Music courses require solutions to accessing scores – in braille this is very complex. You may need to identify suitable computer-based software.

Individual languages may or may not pose particular challenges. If you aim to study a language that uses a non-roman script, first ensure that you can successfully read and write this using your chosen access solution. It would not be a trivial task to learn braille in a non-roman script.

In all cases it is important to discuss your needs and the expectations of the course at an early stage with an adviser in your student support team and your tutor.

# 4 Supporting your learning

The Open University works hard to make sure that all students can participate fully in their courses and in OU life. Dedicated services are available to disabled students with additional requirements. In this guide you will find examples of the services and support you can expect from the OU.

## 4.1 Sources of support

Your student support team has staff to support blind and partially sighted students. They can advise you on course choice and the accessibility of study materials. They also deal with any queries you might have on choosing the best location for a residential school.

Every student is encouraged to contact either their tutor or study adviser with any queries about their course, or to discuss any specific requirements. Your tutor will contact you at the start of your course to tell you the best times to get in touch, usually by phone or email.

If you need it, a small amount of additional time may be available for one-to-one contact with your tutor or another associate lecturer – speak to a member of your student support team to negotiate this.

Student support team phone lines are open Mondays to Fridays from 9:00am to 5:00pm

## 4.2 Web-based support



As a registered student you have access to online study support through [StudentHome](#) (student login details required). This site is your gateway to a range of resources that support your study, and it includes information on your personal study record, the schedule of activities in your course and links to study skills information.

## 4.3 Accessible course materials

For most courses the OU can provide study materials in a variety of formats:

- DAISY digital talking book
- Adobe PDF
- eBook and Kindle eBook
- Html
- Microsoft Word format for some documents
- Comb-bound versions of printed documents, which lie flat so they can be used with a magnifier.

On a case-by-case basis, study materials may also be provided in: enlarged print (A4 to A3); large print; or embossed braille. You should speak to an adviser in your student support team, well in advance of your course starting, if you think you may need one of these formats.

Some study materials for mathematics, science, music and foreign languages may be difficult to access with a screen reader, as described at the end of Section 3. Speak with an advisor in your student support team if you are concerned about accessing such materials.



You can check for more information on the [accessible course materials](#) we can provide on the [Services for Disabled Students](#) website. If you require more information, contact your student support team.

## 4.4 How your tutor can help

Your tutor may not have a detailed knowledge of visual impairment, but will have some general awareness. If you explain your difficulties you will be able to work out together the strategies that will help you.

Get started by writing a list of those things that you find hardest, or any particular concerns you have about your studies. For example, your list might include some of these points.

- I can read large print, but it takes me a long time and I lose the meaning.
- I don't want to feel dependent on other students during residential school, but I won't know my way around.
- Should I record tutorials as a way of taking notes?
- I am not very confident with a computer.
- My spelling is not very good.
- I am worried I won't be able to afford any special equipment or software.

For some issues your tutor may refer you to your student support team.

## 4.5 Disabled Students' Allowances (DSAs)



You may be eligible for a [DSA](#) to help you find study related support, or the purchase of special equipment. Use the short online [DSA quiz](#) to find out if you are eligible.

**Note:** If you are eligible for a DSA, the University will only provide study support that is not covered by this allowance.

## 4.6 Equipment loan

If you are not eligible for a DSA to help you obtain specialist equipment, then the University may be able to provide some on free long-term loan. Available equipment includes digital voice recorders, talking scientific calculators, portable video magnifiers (CCTVs) and computers with screen-reading software.



We can't guarantee that every application for loan equipment will be met, but we will do our best to provide what you need.

## 4.7 Arranging adjustments and support

You will need to provide written evidence of your disability in order to:

- claim the DSA
- request adjustments to OU examination arrangements
- apply for some other financial or equipment schemes.



To tell us about your needs you will need to complete the online [Disability Support Form](#) (student login details required).

This form is used to request the support you would like for your studies and to tell us about any changes to your situation and to the services you already receive.



The OU booklet [Meeting your needs](#) includes a section 'if you are blind or partially sighted.'

### Top tip

As the process of establishing your eligibility for adjustments and support at the OU can typically take four months to arrange, it is advisable to think about applying well in advance. Some support will be available while the claim is going through.

## 4.8 Day and residential schools

Much of your study will be done in places that suit you – at home or in a library, for example. But the places you visit for tutorials, residential schools, examinations or graduations are not OU buildings, and some are not as accessible as we'd like them to be. Because of this, you'll need to check with your student support team that your venue is suitable for your needs.

If you select a course with a residential school, you should consider the level of independence you feel comfortable with in an unfamiliar environment. Will you be able to get about unaided? Will living away from home be a new experience for you? You may like to consider having an assistant to support you. Needs vary from person to person, but an assistant would typically support you in tasks such as:

- taking notes
- meals
- accessing written materials
- describing pictures, locations, situations
- accomplishing practical tasks
- finding your way around the campus or on field trips.

You can take a friend or relative who is familiar with your needs, or we can usually supply an assistant from our register. In either case, the University would bear the cost of the assistant's meals and accommodation. If you have a DSA you may be able to use this money to pay for your support.

If in doubt, ask for advice from your student support team.

## 4.9 Using sighted assistance

Even if you do not have a day or residential school to attend, you may use an assistant of your choosing to help with a range of study tasks such as reading, note-taking, interpreting diagrams or graphs and typing.



For some courses where there is a high level of visual content, for example arts, maths or science courses, students may require higher levels of sighted assistance to support their studies. However, some students find that this approach introduces a level of complexity, by adding an intermediary between them and their studies. Other students prefer to master their own solutions to accessing text, perhaps by learning to touch-type and taking their own notes. It is important to find the method of study that works best for you.

# 5 Visual and non-visual approaches to study

Before you dive into details about the various types of support and special equipment that can help, take a moment to think carefully about how your visual impairment affects the way in which you study.

The term ‘visual impairment’ covers a wide range of degrees of sight, from those who need very little adaptation in the way they study through to those who need to use very different methods because they have no sight at all. Try to be clear in your own mind about your level of functional sight and convey this to the OU. This will make it much more likely that you receive suitable support and receive learning materials in the best format for you.

Ask yourself these two questions.

- 1. Am I able to use any sight I have to read and write at a reasonable speed?** This can include using magnifiers, special glasses, task lighting or electronic devices such as a video magnifier (CCTV).
- 2. Can I see enough on screen to use a computer?** This can include using a large screen, or making adjustments to the software so that text appears larger or displays in different colours.

If you are not sure about the answers to these questions, we suggest you ask your GP to refer you to an eye clinic for a low-vision assessment. There you will be able to work with an optometrist who specialises in helping people make best use of their sight. Tell them about the kinds of things you will need to do in your study so they can identify the most suitable equipment for you.

If your answer is: “Yes, I can study using my level of sight” (probably with devices to help), then you may best be served by using learning materials supplied in accessible formats and by exploring the usefulness of computer screen magnification software. It is likely that you will need to combine some or all of these approaches. These approaches are termed **vision-based study methods**.

If your answer is: “No, I can’t see enough to read, to write and to use a computer using vision”, then you will best be served by using a non-visual study strategy. This might include the use of DAISY audio recordings, software for screen reading and Braille. Such approaches are termed **non-visual study methods**.

Sometimes you may prefer to mix the formats. For example, even if you can read text on screen, after a while you may find this tiring and prefer to switch to listening to an audio device. Don’t feel bound by your initial choices. Always choose what works best for you, even if this changes over time.

Your responses to these two questions will help you to identify the relevant advice in the next three sections, which discuss the support available for study when using computers, accessing printed material and taking notes.

# 6 Using computers

OU courses require you to create documents on a computer. Doing this will be much easier if you develop your computer skills and learn to touch-type. Using a computer can minimise some of the problems you may have with spelling and handwriting; it can also make structuring and planning assignments more manageable. Comprehensive advice on using a computer in OU study is available on the [Computing Skills section](#) of the [Skills for OU Study](#) website.



Try to become competent in using a computer before you start your course, so that learning the technology doesn't interfere with your subject learning. As you use your computer more you will also discover whether you need to make any adjustments, such as adding tools to magnify the screen or software to read aloud what is on the screen.

The adaptations or software solutions you choose will depend on whether you prefer vision-based study methods or non-visual study methods, as described below. If you have a DSA you may be able to use that to pay for specialist software.

All OU students need to access information from the internet, join online forums and tutorials, correspond using emails, make use of word-processing software to keep notes and complete assignments, and manage files stored on the computer. Depending on the particular course, you may also need to use other programs such as spreadsheets, statistics packages or subject-specific applications.

Some OU course software only works on Microsoft Windows at present. Check the course description to find out if your course requires you to have access to a Windows-based computer.

## 6.1 Making the most of computers

### **Vision-based computer access**

Most computers offer a range of built-in accessibility features to alter how images and text appear on screen, with options designed to meet the needs of partially sighted users. These include settings for altering the size and colour of displayed text, the colour contrast between screen elements, and a screen magnification program.

There are also specialist software programs that can magnify elements displayed on screen. One of the best-known is ZoomText, but there are a number of alternatives, some of which are free or of lower cost. For more details see Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

#### **Top tip**

Here is an easy way to use the built-in zoom feature on Windows computers if you have a mouse with a scroll wheel between the two main buttons. Hold down the CTRL key while rolling the wheel to control the on-screen zoom in Microsoft Word, Internet Explorer and many other programs.

## **Non-visual based computer access**

Most computers include a built-in text-to-speech program, which can read aloud text displayed on screen using an artificial voice.

There are also more advanced software applications known as screen-reading programs. One of the best known of these is JAWS. There are a number of alternatives some of which are free or of lower cost. Apple computers come with built-in screen reading software called Voiceover. For more details see Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

### **Top tip**

Even if you have previously used a computer as a fully sighted person, you will find that learning how to use screen magnification or screen-reading programs can be time consuming. The key to success involves time and having a source of well-informed help. There are some suggestions listed in Sources of help and advice (Appendix 1).

Whether you are exploring vision-based or non-visual based options, do try out the built-in accessibility features to give you a basic idea of the possibilities. Advice from someone with knowledge of computing for blind and partially sighted people is very valuable – see Further computer advice and training below.

## Can you do these everyday computing tasks?

It helps if you have these core skills before you begin your course.

- Use a word processor to write and format text, including spell checking and changing the font size.
- Create, save and open documents. The OU requires assignments to be submitted in Microsoft Word format (.doc or .docx) or Rich Text Format (.rtf).
- Organise files: store them, move, rename and delete them.
- Save files to other media such as USB memory sticks, and open files from other media.
- Download and save files from the OU website.
- Make regular backups of your files and know how to retrieve them.
- Send, receive, open and file emails, with attachments.
- Use the internet to locate and browse websites, and to search for and extract information.
- Read documents in electronic format.
- Print files from your computer.

**Note:** Although some material may be supplied in large print, you might also find it useful to print documents in a large, bold font for your own use. You may also need to print some documents even if you don't use print yourself.

Individual OU courses may require further skills, such as the use of spreadsheets.

## Further computer advice and training

Some local societies for blind and partially sighted people run computing courses, and may be able to help you decide whether to use vision-based study methods or non-visual study methods. The RNIB has details of these societies and also produces a series of helpful factsheets in formats including large print, audio recording and braille. See Sources of help and advice (Appendix 1) for contact details.

The RNIB has a number of services to help blind and partially sighted people to get to grips with their technology. They have a dedicated team of volunteers called the Technology Support Squad (TSS). The TSS provides a free national service that can set up, fix issues with, and help you use technology including computers, printers, internet connections, software and more. Call the RNIB helpline 0303 123 9999 for further information or visit the [RNIB](#) website.



The [British Computer Association of the Blind](#) (BCAB) website for up-to-date information and support.

Training in the use of computers is widely available at colleges and adult learning centres, often without charge. You first need to establish which type of software or computer adaptation suits your particular needs, and then enquire whether the college is equipped to offer this.

# 7 Accessing study resources

Studying as a distance learner with the OU means more reading than might be the case at other institutions, where there are greater opportunities to learn from tutors and lecturers in person.

However, OU reading material is carefully selected, so you'll spend less time searching for the relevant articles and information. Your study is also quite structured, with clear instructions on tasks and suggestions for allotting time to them. As a blind or partially sighted student you should find this helpful, although you may discover you need to increase the estimated time you set aside to read materials.

As with computer access, you need to decide which methods of accessing text work best for you.

Most OU reading materials are available in accessible formats, such as:

- eBooks (EPUBS)
- Kindle (Mobi)
- Portable Document Formats (PDFs)
- Word versions (.doc or .docx)
- Audio
- Digital Talking Books (DAISY)
- Comb-bound books
- Enlarged print
- OU Anywhere material if available on module



It is important that you understand what working with a particular format entails and which format you will be using for a particular course. The OU website provides specific guidance about using screen-readers and PDFs [here](#).

There are a number of access options available if the materials are available electronically. These usually involve computer-based text-to-speech programs (also known as screen readers), or magnification technologies such as screen magnification. Sources for some of these options are listed in Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

Alternatively, if the material has been recorded as spoken word, you can access the audio files from your computer or by using an MP3 player, CD player or a DAISY player.

If you are eligible for a DSA, this may be used to pay for some of the equipment.

## Managing your reading

You should allow additional time for reading in your study plans.



It may not be necessary to read everything provided, you could ask your tutor for guidance about essential and non-essential reading. Visit the [Skills for OU Study](#) website for advice for all students on [effective reading techniques](#).

## 7.1 Electronic documents

Although many course materials are available in several accessible formats, these may not always meet your needs directly. For example, not all PDF files are easily accessible as some documents include graphs, pictures or tables. Where possible we provide figure descriptions for these elements but the meaning of some can be difficult to convey in a non-visual way. See also the end of Section 3: Courses that pose particular challenges.



It is worth learning how to search effectively in electronic documents and online as this can speed up your study considerably. The OU website has more information on [searching the web](#) on the [Skills for OU Study](#) website.

### Top Tip

In many computer applications you can search for a word or phrase by using the Ctrl + F (for find) keys.

### Get the clearest view



If you are using your vision to look at the computer screen, try changing the appearance of on-screen text to make it more comfortable to read. The [Using your PC for Study](#) website tells you how to change:

- the colour of the letters
- the colour of the background
- the font style
- the size of the text
- line spacing – try 1.5.



For additional advice on modifying your computer to make reading easier see the [AbilityNet, My Computer My Way](#) website.

## 7.2 Reading by listening

An audio-based alternative to print will change your approach to study: listening to spoken information is a different experience to reading, and it requires different skills and concentration. For example, after listening for a while it is easy to find that you are not really taking in the information. You can help to overcome this if you make notes as you go along, and have regular breaks. There is more information about this in Section 8, Taking notes.

Finding a particular section in a non-print format such as audio or electronic text is less intuitive than when using a printed book, where it is easy to jump back and forth through the text, finding and marking particular sections that you may wish to read again.

In some audio formats it can be quite difficult to carry out these tasks, and you may have to listen to whole chapters or sections just to locate a particular piece of information. This can take time and be frustrating. However, the DAISY Digital Talking Book format overcomes many of these problems.

### **DAISY**

DAISY stands for Digital Accessible Information System. It is a recognised worldwide standard digital reading format that can combine audio, text and graphical information in one production, making it accessible to a wide range of people with print disabilities. DAISY can be played on a standalone DAISY player or by using a DAISY software player on a computer.

DAISY text can be recorded on up to six heading levels. This enables the reader to navigate through the recording by section, sub-section, chapter and page, depending on how the book has been structured. A typical OU course can be navigated by such elements as sentence,

paragraph, page (including specific page numbers) and various heading levels. Depending on the playback equipment being used, it is possible to search for specific words. Bookmarks can be inserted at any point, and the 'resume' function restarts playback from the point left off, rather than at the beginning as with conventional CDs. The facility to access information in a reader-defined order rather than in an order fixed by the recording gives great flexibility and control.

The OU is increasing the provision of audio materials in DAISY format because of its advantages for students. However, not all courses are available as DAISY books, so please talk to an adviser in your student support team before registering for a course if you expect this to be your only way to read course material.

Links to sources of information about DAISY players are provided in Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2). The OU can recommend a DAISY software player for your device.



## 7.3 Is braille for me?

Braille is a tactile form of communication in which raised dots in various patterns represent letters or words. It does provide a closer simulation of reading than is gained through listening to audio, and avoids some of the shortcomings of that medium. However, it is a fairly complex system which usually takes months rather than days to learn. Braille books are bulky, and you would still need to use a computer for your studies. The OU provides very little braille, and further provision would need to be negotiated in advance of your studies.



If you are not able to use your vision to study, you have the time, and can track down a suitable local teaching resource, you may wish to consider learning braille. Do try to speak to a braille user or a rehabilitation worker for visually impaired people before you begin. Ask at your local authority social services office or local society of visually impaired people.

Those students who use braille know how valuable it can be for note-taking and planning assignments. Some students like to be able to print their notes or assignment draft in braille. For this you would need a braille embosser (printer) and should check whether the purchase could be funded by a DSA (Section 4.5).

In subjects that require close attention to punctuation and spacing, or which use special characters such as in computer programming, the use of a refreshable braille display (a device that displays 40/80 characters at a time) would be an advantage. This could be funded by a DSA. Such students may find it useful to consult particular guides on maths, science and music notation as appropriate: see <http://rnib.org.uk>.



## 7.4 Using mobile devices to access study resources

If you use an Android or Apple iOS tablet computer or smartphone you may want to make use of the OU Anywhere app.

OU Anywhere allows you (as a registered student) to download core learning materials to your mobile device and use them offline. You can download eBook versions of your printed textbooks, as well as audio-visual materials.

Using the Android (TalkBack) or Apple iOS (Voiceover) screen reader you can use the OU Anywhere app to access your study materials and have them read to you.

## 7.5 Accessing non-OU materials

As part of your study you may need to read books, journals and other documents from publishers other than the OU.



The OU Library may be able to provide accessible formats of publications that they hold. The [library's disabled user support page](#) provides further information. The library helpdesk can be contacted by calling: +44 (0)1908 659001.

Your student support team will be able to check whether the OU has accessible formats of non-OU materials that the library does not hold, such as electronic copies of set books.

Where the OU does not have non-OU materials in a format that is accessible to you, you will need to find out if they are available elsewhere. For example, accessible eBook copies of print books may be available from online bookstores.

If you cannot find non-OU documents in formats that are accessible to you then you may need to arrange for them to be converted. This is known as transcription.

There are several organisations that provide transcription services: see Sources of help and advice (Appendix 1). Bear in mind that transcription always takes some time, so find out as soon as you can whether you are required to access any materials not supplied by the OU.

# 8 Taking notes

To learn effectively all students need to be able to write down information as they study, whether this is during tutorials, while reading, or during a discussion. Then these notes need to be organised in such a way that they can be easily located and studied later, and if necessary used as the basis for assignments or revision.

Taking notes usually means doing several tasks at the same time: listening or reading, understanding, summarising, writing. Try to explore the tools you already have that might help in note-taking before looking at other solutions that might require more training and practise. Computer programs such as Word or Excel offer lots of useful tools, for example, font size and appearance and charts.

## 8.1 What you can do

It is important that you identify methods of note-taking which work best for you. Here are some examples to consider.

- Record a tutorial using a digital recorder, then listen back later and write down the main points. You can transfer files to a computer, which makes them easier to work with.
- Study a book and note down the main points using your own voice with a digital recorder.
- Use a laptop or small note-taking device to write down notes during a tutorial or while studying a book.
- Ask a sighted assistant to make notes for you.

### Top tip

Most digital recorders enable you to place bookmarks at key places so you can jump to them again later. This can be a real time saver.

It is important to weigh up the benefits and challenges of the various methods of note-taking to find which works best for you. For example, recording a tutorial may seem attractive, but to listen back later to the recording and make notes at that stage effectively doubles your study time. And asking someone else to take notes for you means that they decide what to note down, which may or may not be the same as you would have chosen. To use an electronic note-taking device means you have to be confident and quick in entering text. Some of these devices require a working knowledge of braille (see Section 7.3, Is braille for me?) and others use a small QWERTY keyboard, so it will speed things up greatly if you can touch-type.

There are various portable note-taking devices designed specifically for blind and partially sighted people. For suppliers see Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

### Labelling and storing notes

To make best use of your notes you will need to have a system of creating, organising and retrieving them. If you keep them on your computer, make sure you give them meaningful file names and store them in a logical fashion. If you keep them as printed or brailled hard copies, use a filing system such as colour coded folders. You may wish to consider the Penfriend labeller, as described in Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

## 8.2 Taking notes at tutorials

Your tutor will do their best to make it easy for you to take notes at tutorials, so do make sure to discuss your particular needs. For example, you might ask them to read out text from the board or slides, or provide you with electronic copies of handouts or slides in advance.

You may be able to record what is said at a tutorial or residential school, but please remember that the content of an oral lecture remains the property of the OU so you must request permission in advance via your tutor.

Here are some practical ideas for you to consider.

- Arrange to sit at the front in tutorials if this helps you to see better.
- If you record lectures or discussions, place the recorder near the speaker to produce clearer recordings.
- Ask the tutor to verbalise visual content such as PowerPoint presentations or video clips where the content is not self explanatory from the soundtrack.
- Where whiteboards or flipcharts are being used, explain that you need these to be spoken as they are written.
- Ask for electronic copies of materials used during classes, preferably in advance, so you can review them.
- Request that handouts used during tutor-led sessions are provided to you electronically in advance, or in large print on the day if you prefer.

### Top tip

If you want to record lectures or discussions, you should raise this with your tutor before your first tutorial.

## 8.3 Notes as an aid to learning

Whichever equipment you decide to use, you'll also need to know how to take notes which actually help you to learn. The purpose of note-taking is simple: to help you study better and more quickly. This means your notes don't have to contain everything, they have to contain the most important things.

Making yourself take notes forces you to listen carefully and tests your understanding of the material. The act of writing down important points helps you to remember them later.



Advice on [note-taking techniques](#) for all students is available on the [Skills for OU study](#) website.

### Top tip

There is no 'best method' for note-taking – people vary in what works well for them. Try out different methods to help you decide which is best for you. For example, you may find that making sure you capture the key points while reading or listening is easier if you keep asking yourself: "What is the main fact or idea in this section?" and noting each one. If you use a word processor, consider starting a new page for each topic or sub-heading so that the structure is easier to follow later.

There are a number of strategies particularly suited to blind and partially sighted students. Here is an example that illustrates the close connections between note-taking and learning.

## The Cornell note-taking system

Cornell's method centres on the use of five words beginning with the letter R: **Record**, **Reduce**, **Recite**, **Reflect** and **Review**.

1. **Record.** During a tutorial or while reading, make a note of as many meaningful facts and ideas as you can. This doesn't necessarily mean audio-recording, but capturing information in the way you find most effective.
2. **Reduce.** As soon afterwards as possible, summarise these ideas and facts concisely. Summarising clarifies meanings and relationships, reinforces continuity, and strengthens memory. Also, it is a way of preparing for examinations gradually and well ahead of time.
3. **Recite.** Now try to recall and say out loud the facts and ideas of the subject as fully as you can, not mechanically, but in your own words and with as much appreciation of the meaning as possible. Then check your notes to verify what you have said. This procedure helps to transfer the facts and ideas into your long-term memory.
4. **Reflect.** Reflect on these facts and ideas in order to distil your opinions about them. During reflection you continually label and index experiences and ideas, putting them into structures, outlines, summaries and frames of reference, which reinforces your memory of them.
5. **Review.** If you spend 10 minutes every week or so in a quick review of these notes, you will retain most of what you have learnt, and you will be able to use your knowledge to greater effect.

You can search online for more details about the Cornell method of note-taking.

## SQ3R

SQ3R is a useful technique for extracting the maximum amount of benefit from your reading or listening time. It helps you to organise the structure of a subject in your mind, which can be especially useful if you are visually impaired. It also helps you to set study goals and to separate important information from irrelevant material.

SQ3R is a five-stage active reading technique. The name comes from these stages, which are: Survey, Question, Read, Recall and Review.

This method is fully explained on a number of websites that you can find by searching the internet. Here is one example: <http://www.mindtools.com>.



# 9 Being organised



All OU students have to keep track of a lot of material, but courses do include information to help you plan your study, such as a study calendar or planner, a course guide and an assignment guide. [StudentHome](#) (student login required) holds administrative information for your reference, such as payments made and records of the courses you have chosen and studied.



Staying organised can be a day-to-day struggle for all students, especially if you don't have much spare time for study or don't have a great deal of space to store your study materials. The study skills booklet [Reading and Taking Notes](#) also includes useful advice on getting organised.



There are more ideas about [organisation and time management](#) on the [Skills for OU Study](#) website.

‘ I like to be organised. I know it takes me a long time to do all the reading and I have to think about this at the beginning of the course. Not just the time for reading, but also how and when I am going to make and store my notes. Once I'm organised I feel much more in control. I plan my time carefully and can juggle work, studying and children. Well, most of the time! ’

## 9.1 What you can do

Blind and partially sighted students often find that it helps to be even more organised than other students. To help with organising materials and your notes, work out a system of labelling that suits you. This could include sticky labels and a felt tip pen, perhaps using different colours. Or you might get on well with braille labels. There are also electronic gadgets that are very good at this task, such as the Penfriend device. For more information see Equipment and suppliers (Appendix 2).

### **Set up your computer**

Make sure your word processor is set up to suit your needs. Here are some suggestions.

- Place your screen where it is free of reflections, and adjust its brightness and contrast.
- Experiment with various colours for the text and the background.
- Use Zoom to increase the size of text displayed on screen (Ctrl + roll mouse wheel). You can do this without altering the size text is printed.
- Find a font style and size that suits you.
- Left-justify your text (as in this book). If you know that every line starts on the left then you are less likely to overlook some text.
- Use the keyboard or the mouse, whichever you prefer. Most editing document programs have keyboard shortcuts that can be used instead of mouse action. These are much quicker once you have learnt some you use frequently. For example, in Microsoft Word pressing F7 launches the spell checker.

- Set up Auto Correct to deal with errors you're particularly likely to make, and to complete words and phrases you type in frequently.
- Auto Text or Quick parts in (Microsoft Word) enable you to store text such as your address or student details for insertion into any document.
- Create a template and styles if you're going to produce several documents of a similar kind.

### Top tip

Here are some of the most common keyboard shortcuts that work in nearly all programs that run under Microsoft Windows.

- Ctrl + S for Save
- Ctrl + X for Cut
- Ctrl + C for Copy
- Ctrl + V for Paste
- Ctrl + Z for Undo
- Alt + Tab switches between open programs
- Alt + F4 will close a program.

Use the help system in the software you are using to search for a full list of keyboard shortcuts for that application.

# 10 Writing assignments

Assignment writing can be both challenging and exciting. It involves processes such as research, planning, reflection and organisation. It can be a very enjoyable activity that provides an opportunity to develop your thinking and demonstrate your learning.

Blind and partially sighted students often have very good knowledge and understanding of the course material but can have difficulty keeping track of their assignment plan when organising and structuring this into a piece of written work. You may be able to express yourself well verbally but a slow typing speed can be frustrating as ideas flow far too quickly to be accurately captured on paper.

*‘Finding time to develop my keyboard skills has contributed enormously to my study effectiveness.’*

It is recommended that you read the next assignment question in advance of your reading so that you can relate both your reading and note-taking to it. The [Skills for OU Study](#) website has more ideas about [preparing assignments](#).



If you think you are getting behind in your work and may struggle to complete an assignment on time, it is important to discuss this with your tutor at an early stage so that help or advice can be provided. Don't wait until the problem gets too big or you will get discouraged.

## Typing accuracy and word length

Some blind or partially sighted students struggle to ensure assignments are well laid out, accurately typed, of the correct length, well punctuated with all words spelled correctly.

Knowing how to use your computer's spellchecker and the word count facility help to deal with these concerns. Additionally, if you can find a sighted person to read through the assignment and work with you on some of these aspects it can save you a great deal of time.



It is often difficult to detect misspellings by the use of speech synthesis. The [Skills for OU Study](#) website has information on strategies to help with [grammar, spelling and punctuation](#). Some screen readers can be set up to alert you to spelling and grammar errors.



Ideally, you need to be comfortable in using computers (Section 6). You can choose to use someone else to type up or send in the assignment for you, but you must stay within the rules about what is permitted when using sighted assistance (Section 4.9). See [Writing in your own words](#).

## Using feedback

When your work has been marked, do read the feedback carefully. Tutors are skilled at giving constructive advice and your tutor's feedback will contain pointers for improving your future work and will help you to learn. Make a note of things you would like to improve in your next assignment. If you are unclear about what the comments mean ask your tutor to explain further.

Using feedback is an integral part of developing your approach to assignment writing. Agree a method with your tutor of accessing feedback.

‘I asked my tutor to place three asterisks before and after his comments. I can then use the search facility of my WP program to quickly locate them.’

# 11 Revision and exams

Exams give an indication of your level of expertise in a particular subject and are an opportunity to show what you have learnt.



If you are likely to need extra time, and likely to require approval to use assistive technology in your exam, you must complete a [request form for exam arrangements](#) (student login required). For more information visit the section about examinations on the [Services for Disabled Students](#) website where you will also find instructions on how to complete the request form.

Please submit your FRF3 as early in your course as possible as exam arrangements are made individually with each student, which takes time to set up.

## 11.1 The challenges you might face

Revision and exams can be difficult and stressful for anyone, especially if the last exam taken was a long time ago. Visual impairment can compound the problems, as there is additional pressure on time management and memory skills.

It is important that you feel comfortable with arrangements made for your exam. The two most common arrangements are using a scribe (an amanuensis) or using a computer. If you choose to use a computer do ensure that you are familiar with all the tasks you will need to accomplish, such as saving and retrieving information from an external storage device, saving your work and printing.

Your typing accuracy may deteriorate a little under pressure, so request enough extra time to allow for whatever system you have for correcting your answers.

A specimen exam paper is provided during your course and you should look at it carefully to check whether any problems might be caused by its format. Exam questions are of various different types.

- Essays – similar to essays for assignments, but you won't be expected to include so much detail.
- Structured questions with parts that lead on from each other.
- Questions that require short answers, notes or diagrams – practise each type of answer needed, and check with your tutor if you are unsure.
- Multiple-choice questions – these require careful reading or listening, as it is easy to be misled by the form of the question even if you have a good understanding of the subject.

Multiple-choice questions are more difficult for blind and partially sighted students to complete in the allotted time. If you have useful residual vision highlight the key words in the question before looking at the answer options, or make some notes to help you keep the question clear.

## 11.2 Revision

Revision should be a continuous process, which ideally begins as you work your way through the course and which can help you understand the material. There is then a more intense revision period closer to the exam date, probably following your last assignment. Some of the advice on taking notes is also relevant to revision techniques – see Section 8.2.

Once you have identified what you need to learn you can start to put the materials into a form from which you can learn best. You might like to try word-processed notes, index cards (print or braille) or a dedicated USB or SD card that has audio revision topics on. You'll find other options in the [Revising, examinations and assessment](#) area of the [Skills for OU Study](#) website.



You may also benefit from developing [memory training techniques](#).



### 11.3 How the OU can help

Having the right conditions and facilities for your exam will help to relieve the additional stress that visual impairment can cause. Most blind or partially sighted students take their exam either at home or their place of work. Extra time is essential if your reading or writing is slow, and it will give you time to use your planning strategies too. You may also need short rest breaks.

The access arrangement options available for exams include having the exam paper in an alternative format, such as large print, in audio or braille. As a first step, discuss your options with your student support team.

It's still very important to practise exam techniques beforehand, using past papers if you can. It's also important to practise with your scribe, if you're going to have one.

If over-anxiety is a problem for you there is more information on [managing stress](#) on the [Skills for OU Study](#) website.



# Appendix 1: Sources of help and advice

## OU staff

Contact your student support team to discuss your specific needs and how to access any additional support, such as:

- course choice advice
- financial assistance
- individual access arrangements for exams.

Student support team phone lines are open Mondays to Fridays from 9am to 5pm. There is also an evening advice phone line available out of office hours on 0870 3331 444.

## Your tutor

All tutors have some information on visual impairment and will be happy to discuss your approaches to study. Once your course starts you will find the contact details for your tutor on [StudentHome](#). For detailed advice your tutor will refer you to your student support team.



## Your StudentHome page

[StudentHome](#) is your starting point for online resources. For detailed advice your tutor will refer you to your student support team.



## Other organisations

You are advised where possible to try out one or more alternative options, hands-on, before making a purchase of equipment. It would also be beneficial to seek professional guidance. Here are some organisations that can provide independent advice.

### RNIB

The RNIB has a series of factsheets that give useful advice about many types of equipment to help blind and partially sighted people, including students. These are available online.



[RNIB](#) and [Action for Blind People](#) have resource centres in London and a few other major cities where equipment can be examined. Contact the RNIB helpline to find the nearest location that carries specific items of interest on 0303 123 9999.



RNIB also have an [online shop](#) which sells a number of items suitable for assisting study.

### Rehabilitation workers

Many local authorities (councils) employ a rehabilitation worker for advising blind or partially sighted people, usually based at their social services department or adult care section.

### Local societies for blind and partially sighted people

These vary in the scope of equipment that they carry and their level of expertise in this field. The larger organisations are more likely to have well-stocked resource centres with experienced staff. Details of your local society for blind and partially sighted people is available from the RNIB by calling 0303 123 9999.

## Appendix 2: Equipment and suppliers

### Obtaining special equipment



If you qualify for the [Disabled Students' Allowance](#) your learning, technology and training needs will be assessed and recommendations made regarding suitable equipment. This equipment is usually bought for you, so you don't have to decide where to obtain it.

However, you may be in the situation of choosing and obtaining some equipment or software yourself. The information below will help you to find suitable solutions.

Much of the equipment you will wish to consider is rather specialised and not available in high street stores. Some can be purchased online.

### Access technology

Access technologies (also known as Assistive technologies), such as screen readers, magnification packages, etc., are complex and usually require experienced guidance to choose, obtain and set up.



The RNIB offer advice on [selecting and purchasing access technology](#) on their website and via their telephone helpline.

The RNIB helpline number is: 0303 123 9999.

## Screen magnification

A screen magnifier is designed for people with low vision and can magnify everything on a computer, tablet or mobile phone screen.

Computer screen magnifiers will usually include extra features such as the ability to change screen colours, enhance mouse pointers or cursors, and sometimes include reading features and basic screen reading functions.

Any recent computer running Windows, Mac OS X or Linux (that's almost all of them) have some screen magnification built into them. Built-in magnifiers will not enlarge your screen as much or as smoothly as the commercial products, but they may be all you need.

For further information or advice on assistive technology contact Action for Blind People through the RNIB helpline: 0303 123 9999 or visit the [Action for Blind People assistive technology website](#).



## Screen readers

Screen readers are designed to give blind people access to information on a computer, tablet device or a mobile phone by reading the information using a synthetic voice rather than the user reading it with their eyes. This means you don't have to be able to see the device to use it. A screen reader does much more than just read text, it will allow you to navigate round your computer using speech. For instance, it can tell you:

- what page or file you are in
- what icons are on the screen
- what webpage you are on

- whether a link in the web page has been visited
- whether a tick box is ticked or unticked
- if some text is underlined.

For people who read braille, a screen reader will also display this information on a refreshable braille display.



Most computers and a growing number of mobile phones come with a screen reader already installed. On a Microsoft Windows computer, [Narrator](#) is built in however its functions are currently very limited, it is best described as speech support rather than a screen reader and would not be adequate for OU Study. On an Apple Mac computer [VoiceOver](#) is included; this is a fully functioning screen reader. Both of these products come with tutorials designed to get you going.



Other screen readers include [JAWS](#), [NVDA](#), [Window-Eyes](#), [SuperNova Screen Reader](#) and [System Access](#).

For people with mobile phones and tablets, two of the most popular operating systems already have a screen reader built in.



- Apple's iPhone has a screen reader called [VoiceOver](#); the same screen reader is also on the iPod touch and iPad.



- The latest versions of Android contain a screen reader called [TalkBack](#).

There is currently no screen reader for a Windows phone. Screen readers vary in price from free to £1000 depending on the product.

## Magnifiers and aids to low vision

Solutions range from a simple hand magnifier through to electronic magnification devices, which are available from various specialist suppliers.



- [Optelec](#)
- [Humanware](#)

## Note-taking devices

A notetaker is a small computer specifically designed for use by blind and partially sighted people. It can have either a QWERTY (standard type) or Braille keyboard. Instead of displaying the information on a screen it is read out in speech, displayed in Braille or both. See the RNIB guidance on these on their [Beginners guide to assistive technology](#) webpage.



## Digital voice recorders and portable DAISY players

It is possible to purchase portable devices that can both play DAISY books and be used as a digital recorder.

Alternatively, for a lower cost, a digital recorder can be used for recording tutorials or personal notes. They are similar to tape recorders, but are small and light with a built in microphone, and make their recordings in the form of digital files which can usually be transferred to a computer. You will find that models which include a bookmarking facility are especially useful for student use.

Several models can be bought from high street catalogue stores or online retailers. However, you are advised to get advice from a supplier who understands the needs of blind or partially sighted people, such as the RNIB or a

local society for blind or partially sighted people. Leading manufacturers include Olympus, Philips and Sony. Models supplied by the RNIB have instruction manuals as Word files.

## Labelling

There are many different ways that you can label items or objects to make them easier to identify, including clear print and large print labels, audio labels, braille labels and tactile labels.



RNIB give details for the different [labelling strategies](#), including the handy PenFriend audio labeller.

## Transcription services

A number of organisations transcribe material from print format into something more accessible for a visually impaired user, such as audio, braille, large print or an electronic format.



[A2i](#) is an example of an organisation offering commercial transcription services.



RNIB also offer [transcription services](#).



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