

Studying English at Aarhus University: The Unknown Unknowns

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ABSTRACT

This editorial offers tips for first-year students in the Department of English at Aarhus University. It advises students to get organized, hack their habits, use the library, and write shitty first drafts.

Keywords: study habits; shitty first draft; AU Library; time management; exams; studying;
meta learning

It's sometimes said that a university education provides more questions than answers. I don't know if that's true overall, but it's certainly true for the first few weeks. The English degree program at Aarhus University is no different. There's a lot to take in.

The questions that arise are often concrete and definite: where to go get to X, whom to ask to learn more about Y? In the immortal words of Donald Rumsfeld, these are the Known Unknowns: the questions that you know to ask. Happily, the program has a whole infrastructure in place to help you find answer those questions. You're already getting acquainted with it.

In this editorial to the third issue of *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English*, I'll speak to a different set of questions: the Unknown Unknowns—the questions that you didn't know to ask. I'll try to put into words some of the more-or-less tacit knowledge I've gained during my own studies at the Department of English. (Having recently completed my MA, I am now doing a PhD.) The following five tips should help you manage your time and up your productivity. Here goes.

Tip 1: Get Organized

If you haven't already, make sure to prepare your computer for what's ahead. Start by making a new folder for first semester that will hold all your readings and papers. Then, make a folder for each course on the semester. While you're at it, decide on a simple naming scheme for all the articles you'll come to download in connection with your studies. I use "author last name + year of publication + short description." Example: "Freud 1905 This is really quite disconcerting." I shudder to think of how many hours I've wasted trying to locate some old pdf or exam paper hidden within the darkest recesses of my hard drive.

If you want to go a step further, you could download a reference manager to help you organize and access your sources. For example, check out the reference manager Mendeley [here](#).

Finally, use some type of cloud storage, such as [Dropbox](#), for all your study material. Cloud storage is invaluable for two reasons: First, it saves your work in case your hard drive dies. Second, it allows you to access your work through virtually any digital device. The benefits of this should be obvious.

Tip 2: Hack Your Habits

As you know, you're here to think deeply and critically about all the topics you'll encounter during your studies. Almost as important, however, is to think critically about all this thinking you're in for. Make sure you approach your studies in a way that works for you.

For instance, try to figure out at what time during the day you are most alert and focused. Do the hardest work—usually writing—in this window. Try different forms of note-taking to see how you maximize retention of the material. Analogical notetaking (with a pen and paper) is still the

preferred method for many. Personally, I almost never take notes. The few times I do, I never look at them again. That may sound odd, but it works for me because it allows me to focus more on the speaker. The important thing is that I've tried taking notes so that, when I choose not to, I do so secure in the knowledge that I'm not compromising my studies.

Experiment with your study conditions. To some people, studying at home, amidst countless digital and comestible temptations, is a recipe for disaster. To others it's no problem at all.

And how might you best remember the meaning of uncommon words, such as "comestible"? Try writing them down with a definition or saying them out loud a few of times while picturing what they mean in your mind's eye.

In short, experiment.

Tip 3: Use the Library

The librarians in the AU (Nobel) Library and Royal Danish Library are there for you. Never feel bad for asking them for help, even if you feel like you're asking something that you should've picked up in class. Two prominent challenges for new students are literature searches (how to find source material for your exam paper) and proper referencing (how to cite sources correctly). These challenges happen to coincide with the highest callings of the librarian.

Okay, this tip is perhaps not an Unknown Unknown. Our librarians usually don't beat around the bush with the fact that they enjoy helping flailing first-years out. Still, a lot of students don't use the librarians even for the kinds of thing they're best at. That's a shame, for both parties. Help a librarian by letting them help you.

Tip 4: Start Writing with a Shitty First Draft

In my experience, many students suffer from some degree of writing anxiety. I count myself among them. You want to produce a great exam paper, to impress both yourself and your examiner, and so you fret about the details. This can be paralyzing. You end up procrastinating, and when you finally get to work, that very first sentence just won't fall into place. "Don't start on a bad note!", you tell yourself.

Well, don't. Start on a shitty note instead. Write a *shitty first draft*. Just get your ideas down on the page; worry about presenting them forcefully and elegantly later. It's an incredibly effective approach for getting the creative juices flowing. And no matter how shitty the shitty draft is, you're bound to produce at least something that's useable. Once you're done with the first draft, you can beat it into shape by checking the structure, doing the references, and tightening the prose. There will be plenty of time for this since, as you'll come to see, producing a shitty first draft doesn't take very long at all.

In case you're wondering, I can't take credit for the term "shitty first draft," nor for the underlying idea. The term comes from the novelist Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1995). I picked it up from Howard S. Becker's *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article* (2007). Despite the latter book's title, it's not just for social scientists. I highly recommend it.

Tip 5: Coffee

Yes, coffee.

That's it! I hope these tips will help you get a good start to your studies in the Department of English at Aarhus University.

References

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