



Independent Study

Sixth Form

St Ambrose College

Introduction

Sixth form is an exciting and challenging stage in your education, requiring a greater level of responsibility, organisation, and independent learning. It's important that you make the most of your time outside of the classroom in order to support your learning and achievement. This booklet is designed to help you develop effective study habits, manage your time wisely, and take advantage of what's on offer throughout your time at St Ambrose College Sixth Form. This booklet provides practical advice and strategies designed to help you on your journey to achieving the best grades you can, preparing for university or apprenticeships, and balancing studying with extracurricular activities. Use this booklet as a reference throughout the year, adapting the suggestions to suit your own learning style and goals.

The students who achieve their potential and who gain the highest marks are those who take the greatest responsibility for their own progress. This independence of approach is an area that all students should strive to improve, building on strategies that you have started to develop for GCSE. At KS5 there is greater expectation that students develop independent skills and knowledge to underpin those learnt in class. These skills aren't just important for your time in education: [taking responsibility for yourself](#) is crucial to your future.

Key things to remember

- Stay organised: keep on top of your [notes](#), [homework and extra reading](#). Keep track of missed work/ lessons and catch up as soon as you can.
- Study little and often: create a timetable and stick to your regular schedule as much as possible. A good rule of thumb is to assume that for every taught lesson you receive, you should be completing another hour's worth of work outside of that lesson.
- Work in a studious environment: avoid distractions, be it social media, TV, or friends. At home, if possible, work somewhere you will not be disturbed.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it! Don't suffer in silence and **don't pretend you understand something when you DON'T**.
- Use all available resources: teachers, textbooks, libraries, periodicals, the Internet, newspapers, podcasts, or your peers.
- Motivate yourself: have a goal and reward yourself, eg. 30 minutes of TV or gaming after studying.
- Don't cram: spread your learning out using [spaced repetition](#) (see the [REVISION GUIDE](#) for help on this).
- Timing is key: most students benefit from working for 25-55 minutes and then taking a 5 minute break.
- The **more you put in, the more you get out**, both in terms of results and enjoyment!
- You should be updating your [Study Log](#) throughout the year in Supervised Study sessions. Download this to your own files to update and complete.

FAQ: Independent Learning

Is it okay to have the TV or music on while studying?

It depends on how you work best. Some students find that instrumental music or low volume background sounds help them focus. However, watching TV or listening to music with lyrics can be distracting because your attention is split between studying and following the show or song. Be honest with yourself!

I work better under pressure and leave things until the last minute. Is that a problem?

While some people feel they perform well under pressure, last minute work often leads to mistakes, increased stress, and lower quality outcomes. Planning your time in advance allows for a more thorough and thoughtful approach, giving you a better chance of achieving your best results.

I do lots of extracurricular activities. How can I fit in my independent study?

Time management is crucial. Plan your study sessions around your commitments and use your free time effectively. Even short, focused study sessions can be

highly productive. The busiest people often get the most done because they plan ahead and use their time efficiently. Use a calendar or a timetable (one is available in the back of the [REVISION GUIDE](#)).

Why does my mind go blank in exams?

This usually happens due to stress or insufficient preparation. The best way to prevent it is to revise regularly, use active recall techniques, and complete past paper questions under timed conditions. This will help you feel more confident and prepared, reducing anxiety on the day.

How can I remember important facts more easily?

Spaced repetition! Use different revision techniques such as flashcards, mind maps, or teaching the content to someone else. Display key facts where you will see them regularly: on your desk, your bedroom wall, or even on sticky notes around the house. The more often you see and engage with the information, the better you will remember it.

See the [REVISION GUIDE](#) for further support.

Keeping your notes organised

Organisation matters. Staying organised will help you keep track of key concepts, assessments, and revision materials. Well structured notes make revision easier and reduce last minute stress.

- Use a **folder system** (even if you use an exercise book in lessons)
 - Have separate folders for each subject
 - Have separate sections for each topic
- Date and title your notes
 - Don't underestimate how important it is to be able to sequence your learning
 - If you miss a lesson, catch up on the work you missed by asking someone in your class if you can photocopy their notes and then place this in your folder
 - If you want to be extra organised, you could even create a contents page in your folders
- Use **colour coding**
 - Highlight key points, definitions, and examples for easy reference
 - Use colour coded folders and be consistent – this helps with recall too
 - Use colour coding when you highlight, for example:
 - Red: things to remember or avoid
 - Blue: definitions
 - Green: theories or case studies
 - Yellow: questions, prompts for further thought, or areas to review
 - Purple: vocabulary, new terminology
 - Orange: dates or formulae
 - Keep a key in the front of your folders to remind yourself of these
- Summarise
 - At the end of each lesson, each week and each topic, write a short summary of what you have learnt
 - Details on how to do this effectively are included below
- Optional: keep digital backups
 - Scan or take photos of your notes and store them in cloud storage (Google Drive, Onedrive, etc.)
 - Use a digital note organising platform (eg. Microsoft OneNote)

Reviewing your learning

You should review your learning **regularly**. See [this video](#) for further information on why this is important. At the end of each lesson, each week and each topic, you should aim to summarise what you have learnt. This sounds repetitive but this will help to reflect on the lesson content and move the information to your **long-term memory**.

After every lesson

- ⌚ Spend 10-15 minutes after school reviewing what you learnt in each lesson that day
- ⌚ Identify key concepts and areas that need further clarification (either research these yourself using textbooks, YouTube etc. or speak to your teacher)
- ⌚ Create a 'summary sheet' with key points from the day's lessons
- ⌚ This can then go in your folder in sequence
- ⌚ When you come to revise, all of your content will be neatly organised ready for you to revisit

At the end of each week

- ⌚ Dedicate around 1 hour to revisiting what you have studied
- ⌚ Use retrieval practice: test yourself on key information without looking at your notes
- ⌚ Add to your daily summary sheets with additional information, connections between different lessons, etc.
- ⌚ Identify any gaps in your understanding and seek clarification

At the end of each topic

- ⌚ Dedicate around 1 hour to revisiting what you have studied: this would be a good time to test yourself on what you've learnt
- ⌚ Make flashcards, mind maps etc. to reinforce learning: these are then ready to go for when exams come around
- ⌚ Identify any gaps in your understanding and seek clarification

Independent Reading and Research

“Reading and exposure to a wide range of texts make a huge contribution to students’ educational achievement.” All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education

“Developing a love of reading can be more important for a child’s educational success than their family’s socio-economic background.” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

Why read beyond the curriculum?

Independent reading broadens your knowledge, strengthens critical thinking, and deepens your understanding of subjects. You will often be set homework tasks that involve research. This enables you to find out more about a topic than can be covered in lessons. Usually there is more than one point of view on something, so it’s important to look at the wider picture – this will allow you to evaluate theories more effectively, resulting in higher marks.

Every subject you study will provide you with some suggested **recommended reading (books, articles etc.)**. In addition to this, the [Internet](#) is a great place to start using sites like **Google Scholar** and **Google Books** (texts may be available in full or as partial extracts). There are many other reputable sources of information such as **public libraries, online news publications, professional journals** and **periodical publications, Ted Talks, YouTube, MOOCs** and **online courses**, and **online university lectures**. Another good place to look is the **bibliography** of texts/ articles you find. Searching for the name of a text/book with ‘pdf’ can sometimes yield results. Be aware that not everything online is checked for accuracy. For some subjects, it might be worth buying a **book of theorists or concepts** (cheap 2nd hand copies can often be found [online](#)). **Podcasts, radio shows** and **documentaries** are useful, particularly when learning on the go.

How to read and [make notes](#) effectively

- ❑ The key is not to copy down chunks of text from a book. Your aim is to make clear notes using a few of your own words. You may also wish to note your own ideas that have been prompted by text you have read.
- ❑ Be selective. Write down the main subject and important headings before you start, then fill in notes on these areas.
- ❑ Look up any unfamiliar terms to expand your vocabulary.
- ❑ Focus on the topic or essay title. Keep referring back to this and make sure your notes are relevant.
- ❑ If you come across information you think may be useful in a different subject or essay, make a separate note of the reference and return to it later, at the appropriate time.
- ❑ It can be useful to read through specific chapters, handouts or other information before a lesson. Note down obvious subject headings and leave blank spaces to fill in with your lesson or homework notes.
- ❑ **Copy the link/ add it to your favourites on your browser and note down the name/ author of whatever you read – you will be grateful you did in the future (eg. if you’re taking an NEA subject, you’ll be in a better position to complete this if you’ve noted down key theorists and your ideas on this)**

Balancing study and extracurriculars

Time management tips

- Use a timetable or digital calendar (eg. Outlook calendar): schedule your study sessions, extracurriculars, and personal time.
- Set priorities: identify urgent tasks and allocate time accordingly. [Avoid procrastination](#): aim to do little and often.
- Check [this website](#) for further support with time management.
- Use the [Pomodoro Technique](#): study for 25-55 minute blocks with 5 minute breaks to maintain focus.

Maintaining wellbeing

- Ensure you get adequate sleep (7-9 hours per night).
- Take breaks to avoid burnout – exercise, socialise, or engage in hobbies.
- Don’t hesitate to seek support if you feel overwhelmed.

Enjoying Sixth Form

Sixth form is not just about academic success – it’s also about personal growth and making the most of opportunities available to you.

- ✓ Get involved in societies, sports teams, or student leadership roles.
- ✓ Build strong relationships with teachers and peers.
- ✓ Explore potential career or university options early to stay motivated.
- ✓ Stay open minded and curious – learning extends beyond the classroom.

Effective Reading

Reading is a fundamental part of studying. At A Level, you will encounter three main challenges:

- The large amount of reading required
- The complexity of the texts
- Retaining the information you have read

Reading strategies

Experienced readers adjust their reading speed and approach depending on the type of text and their reason for reading it. For instance, reading a novel is very different from looking up information in a textbook. There are several key reading techniques that can help improve efficiency:

- 🔊 Skimming – this involves quickly glancing through a text, focusing on key elements such as the table of contents, headings, introductions, and conclusions. It is a fast and effective way to get an overview of a book or article and is useful for checking relevance or locating specific information. For example, you might skim a newspaper to find an article of interest or skim a textbook to pinpoint a useful chapter.
- 🔊 Scanning – this method is used to locate specific details rapidly. It involves searching for particular words, phrases, or key features like diagrams and titles while ignoring other content. Scanning is especially helpful when looking for precise information, such as a scientific formula or a definition.
- 🔊 In-depth reading – this is a careful and thorough reading approach used when studying a text in detail. It often involves rereading sections, making notes, and summarising key points. This method is essential when you need to fully understand a topic.
- 🔊 Close reading – sometimes, every word in a text needs to be carefully considered, such as when analysing literature or interpreting an exam question. In these cases, reading slowly and paying attention to every detail is necessary.

To study effectively, it is important to adapt your reading style based on the situation. Developing the ability to switch between different methods will significantly improve your efficiency.

Understanding difficult language

Reading can be more challenging when a text includes technical terminology or complex language. Rather than guessing meanings, always use a dictionary or subject glossary to clarify unfamiliar words.

Engaging with what you read

Reading should be an active process. As you read, think critically about the material:

- ? Do you agree with the author's perspective (if it is open to interpretation)?
- ? How strong is their argument?
- ? Do you have an alternative viewpoint?
- ? What counterarguments could you consider?
- ? By actively engaging with the material, you will gain a deeper understanding and develop stronger analytical skills.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking means going beyond simply accepting information at face value. It involves questioning, analysing, and evaluating ideas to judge how accurate, reliable, and useful they really are. In sixth form, you'll often need to consider other people's arguments, weigh up their strengths and weaknesses, and present your own point of view with clear, well-structured reasoning.

Developing these skills will help you succeed in your studies as well as preparing you for higher education, work, and life beyond the classroom. Employers particularly value critical thinking because it enables you to filter information, make sound judgments, and solve problems effectively.

What makes a good critical thinker?

- ❖ Curiosity – asking questions and showing interest in a wide range of issues
- ❖ Well informed awareness – seeking out knowledge and staying up to date
- ❖ Confidence in reasoning – trusting your ability to analyse and make sense of complex ideas
- ❖ Open mindedness – considering different perspectives without bias
- ❖ Flexibility – being willing to adapt your thinking when presented with new evidence
- ❖ Foresight – anticipating consequences and recognising potential outcomes

- ❖ Empathy – understanding the viewpoints of others, even if you disagree
- ❖ Fairness – judging ideas on their merit, not on personal bias or prejudice
- ❖ Honesty – recognising your own assumptions and limitations
- ❖ Prudence – knowing when to pause, reflect, or revise your judgments

In short, critical thinking is about being reflective, fair, and analytical in your approach to information. Practising these skills will make you a stronger learner, a better problem solver, and a more thoughtful individual.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism occurs when you take someone else's work and present it as if it were your own. In simple terms, it is a form of intellectual theft. This issue is becoming increasingly common in schools and universities. Higher education institutions take plagiarism very seriously and have strict measures in place to detect it. While plagiarism is often associated with written work, it can also involve other types of content, such as images or computer code. Many universities use advanced software to identify copied material, and the consequences of plagiarism can be severe, ranging from losing marks to being expelled from the institution. It's simply not worth the risk. **Note: students using any unacknowledged content generated by AI within a piece of work or assessment as though it is their own work academic misconduct. AI can be used to support you with revision and understanding, but it MUST NEVER be used to produce work for you.**

Citing sources vs. plagiarism

There is a clear difference between properly crediting someone else's work and committing plagiarism. In academic writing, referencing other scholars' work is essential, as it helps to place your own research in a broader context. If you want to quote directly from a source, you must acknowledge it by including a reference. This can be done through footnotes or by using an in-text citation, such as the [Harvard referencing system](#), which includes the author's name and the page number in brackets. When quoting, keep the excerpt as short as possible and ensure that it supports your argument rather than replacing your own analysis. Copying large sections of text from a book or website without proper acknowledgment is not appropriate.



Common time management problems and how to solve them

Procrastination

- ☹️ Problem: Putting off tasks until the last minute, leading to rushed work and stress
- 😊 Solution: Use the Pomodoro Technique (25-55 minute blocks with 5 minute breaks), set clear deadlines, and break tasks into smaller steps to make them feel more manageable

Poor prioritisation

- ☹️ Problem: Spending too much time on less important tasks while neglecting important ones
- 😊 Solution: Use the [Eisenhower Matrix](#) to categorise tasks as urgent/important, and focus on high-priority activities first

Lack of a clear schedule

- ☹️ Problem: Wasting time deciding what to do next or forgetting important deadlines
- 😊 Solution: Plan your week in advance using a digital or paper planner, and set specific times for studying, breaks, and extracurricular activities

Getting distracted easily

- ☹️ Problem: Losing focus due to social media, notifications, or background noise
- 😊 Solution: Use apps like [Forest](#) or [StayFocusd](#) to block distractions, study in a quiet environment, and set specific times for checking your phone

Underestimating how long tasks take

- ☹️ Problem: Not allowing enough time for assignments or revision, leading to rushed work
- 😊 Solution: Track how long tasks *actually* take and build in extra time for unexpected delays

Overcommitting

- ☹️ Problem: Taking on too many responsibilities, leaving little time for rest or personal study
- 😊 Solution: Learn to say no to commitments that you don't need or want (where possible or reasonable), and prioritise tasks that align with your goals

Not taking breaks

- ☹️ Problem: Trying to work for long hours without rest, leading to burnout and reduced productivity
- 😊 Solution: Use the Pomodoro Technique

Cramming instead of regular revision

- ☹️ Problem: Leaving revision until the last minute, making it harder to retain information
- 😊 Solution: Use spaced repetition by reviewing material regularly and interleaving different topics to improve long term retention

Inefficient study methods

- ☹️ Problem: Spending hours passively rereading notes without truly understanding the material
- 😊 Solution: Use active learning techniques like summarising, self quizzing, and teaching the material to someone else

Not reviewing progress

- ☹️ Problem: Continuing ineffective study habits because there's no reflection on what works
- ✓ Solution: Set aside time each week to assess what study methods are effective and adjust your approach if necessary



Presentation Skills

In sixth form, you'll be asked to present more often, whether it's leading part of a lesson, sharing research with your class, or presenting your Thursday Thought. Strong presentation skills will give you confidence for life beyond education – think about how many job interviews you could complete in the next few years!

Before the presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Know your material. Understand your topic well enough to explain it clearly without reading from a PowerPoint slide.✓ Structure your talk. Have a clear beginning (introduction), middle (main points), and end (conclusion).✓ Plan your visuals. Slides or handouts should support your talk, not replace it. Keep slides simple: one idea per slide, with minimal text.✓ Practise. Rehearse aloud, ideally in front of a friend or mirror. Time yourself so you don't overrun or fall short of the allotted time. Give yourself extra material just in case.	During the presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Start confidently. Take a breath, smile, and introduce yourself and your topic clearly.✓ Speak clearly and at a steady pace – don't rush; pause to emphasise key points.✓ Make eye contact. Look around the room rather than reading only from your notes.✓ Use body language. Stand tall, use natural gestures, and avoid fidgeting or leaning.✓ Engage your audience. Ask a question, use a short story or example, or link the topic to real life situations.
Handling nerves <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Remember that most people feel nervous: it's normal.✓ Channel your adrenaline into enthusiasm rather than panic.✓ Use breathing techniques: take a slow breath before you start and pause if you feel overwhelmed.✓ Focus on your message rather than yourself. Your audience is there to learn from you, not to judge you.	After the presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Invite questions and listen carefully before answering.✓ Reflect afterwards: what went well? What would you improve next time?✓ Accept feedback positively: it's an opportunity to grow.
Tips for success <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Less is more: keep your points concise and memorable.✓ Use stories, examples, or data to bring your talk to life. Practise with different audiences (friends, family, peers) to build confidence.✓ Remember: confidence grows with experience. Every presentation makes the next one easier.	

Essay Writing

Understand the Question

- 👉 Highlight command words (eg. explain, evaluate)
- 👉 Underline key terms
- 👉 Make sure you know exactly what the question is asking

Research

- 👉 Use class notes and recommended reading
- 👉 Go beyond textbooks (articles, websites, journals)
- 👉 Collect evidence and examples to back up your points

Generate ideas

- 👉 Mindmap everything you can think of linked to the title
- 👉 Shift from "what others say" to "what you think."

Plan your essay

- 👉 Organise ideas logically (eg. begin in a logical place, link ideas by themes etc)
- 👉 Structure:
 - Introduction – set out topic and argument
 - Main paragraphs – focused, developed, relevant, linked
 - Conclusion – summarise key points and directly answer the question

Write in one go

- 👉 Keep your flow; don't obsess over tiny edits
- 👉 Focus on developing your argument clearly

Review and refine

- 👉 Check spelling, grammar, punctuation
- 👉 Ensure paragraphs break at the right places
- 👉 Ask: Does it make sense? Is there enough evidence?
- 👉 Most importantly: Have I answered the question?

Taking responsibility for your learning

Here's a template of a grid you can use to track your grades across your A Level subjects over the course of a year. Put these in your folder to keep track of your assessments and any areas for improvement.

Test	Date	Subject: (Topic, grade and %)	Targets for improvement
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			

Where to go for support

- Form teacher
- Head of year
- Class teachers
- Mr Groves or Miss Dean

Remember, we can only help you if we know about the problem. Please don't suffer in silence if something is wrong. You're not expected to deal with everything on your own if you're struggling, and there's nothing wrong with needing support.