

Book Review

Study and Communication Skills for the Biosciences

By Stuart Johnson and Jon Scott

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The transition from school to university is a difficult area for most students; the emotional and logistical support from the parental home is lost and, at the same time, the requirements of the university curriculum are made manifest through a series of new academic demands which are substantially different from school or college challenges: disorientation often ensues. Although there is plenty of information and advice for new students available, particularly online, it is not surprising if much of this is only partially digested due to its sheer volume. The convenience of a condensed and readable text, written with the first year arrival in mind, in a handy portable format capable of being read without pop-up distractions, is an ideal orientation guide for those arriving in the new land with a spinning compass.

Study and Communication Skills for the Biosciences sets out by introducing the key values of effective time management, critical thinking and self development; talents of value no matter what the discipline. It then proceeds to inspire the student through realistic situations which the authors have addressed over a number of years. Chapter two provides alternative ways to make the most of lectures (and why they exist) by preparation and listening skills. Note-taking and summary techniques are sensibly described – enough to be efficient and effective without burdensome obsession with capturing irrelevant details. Chapter three shows a goal orientated approach linked to actions for using academic (paper and online) information sources with search techniques which can easily liberate the Wikipedia dependent. The writing styles and skills that are expected (often frustratingly neglected by the txt-savvy student) are clearly set out in chapter four, which also explains how punctuation actually works in scientific writing. Essay planning and writing are dissected in chapter five (including using previous feedback) and chapter six adds the necessary habits for practical write-ups. Using tutorials is detailed in chapter seven; it should enable the students to know how to contribute without fear of asking any questions and get the best from the tutor's experience, subsequently adding social and academic skills for working in groups to produce coordinated work. Plagiarism and referencing gets an intelligent and up-to-date treatment in chapter eight (although reference to new student orientated plagiarism detection services could be added) and their cohabiting accidental sins of academic ignorance and incompetence, using case studies to illustrate the "grey-zones". Presenting all this work orally gets a thorough analysis (and many pragmatic tips are given) in chapters nine and ten, with essential poster techniques provided in the subsequent chapter.

The final chapters from twelve to fourteen explain how feedback should be analysed and used (whatever the format) before revision methods and active techniques are presented for the essential skills for performing to one's best in the exams.

My recent experience with assembling and preparing online guides for the most up-to-date skills for a faculty wiki project led me to believe that the book format was less and less valuable for study and communication skills. However, when a work as readable as this, with its neat and compact sections for explanation and reference arrives, then I must reconsider. Unfortunately the companion website (<http://www.oup.com/uk/orc/bin/9780199219834/>) has only a little support for the final chapters and could clearly do with additions to link to plagiarism and statistics resources (the book sensibly defers to specialised text for further data analysis and statistics).

This book is as valuable and readable for those with strong study skills as it is for those who clearly need the advice and orientation – this is by no means a patronising “dummies guide”. If I had to give my first-year tutees one book to start their time at university and launch them into the Higher Education landscape then this would probably be it.

Reviewed by T J McAndrew

Centre for Bioscience
The Higher Education Academy
University of Leeds
LS2 9JT
UK
t.j.mcandrew@leeds.ac.uk