



# Student SkillPack

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# Identifying Strengths and Improving Skills

**STARTER LEVEL**



# IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND IMPROVING SKILLS Starter Level

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## CONTENTS

- 1 Identifying your skills: strategies to help
- 2 Developing your skills
- 3 Improving your self-evaluation skills
- 4 References and bibliography

*'I just want to get on with the course. Why bother thinking about myself?'*

Taking stock, identifying what you are good at and what you need to improve should make you feel more confident about your strengths, help you work out how to do things better, and improve your learning and performance on the course.

*'Leopards can't change their spots. Old dogs can't learn new tricks.'*

This SkillPack is based on a different view – that people can and do change.

### We suggest you use this SkillPack:

- to identify your current skill level
- to identify evidence of your abilities (important if you are asked to demonstrate that you have a skill for coursework assessment, or if you are applying for placements or jobs)
- to identify which other SkillPacks might help you and which actions to take to improve your skills.

### When you have completed it, you should be able to:

#### *Agree targets*

- identify and select possible strategies to self-evaluate
- identify your own strengths and areas to improve
- identify possible sources of evidence to illustrate strengths and areas to improve
- plan actions to build on strengths and improve skills, with targets, timescales and resources/support needed
- identify factors which might affect your plans.

#### *Use your plan*

- prioritise skills to focus on it
- carry out plans, monitoring and revising them as needed
- seek feedback on your own performance and use feedback and support to improve.

#### *Review progress and achievements*

- summarise your own skills and provide evidence for your strengths and areas to improve
- identify progress made in developing skills and what affected this
- identify ways of improving your skills in self-evaluation in the future.

(Based on QCA Key Skill specifications, QCA 2000)

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### Confidentiality

This SkillPack is designed for your use alone, although you can show it to others if you choose. You can keep it and extract information from it in the future (eg if you need to provide evidence of your abilities on your course – students on some courses need to do so in portfolios, or for a placement or job application).

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## 1 Identifying your skills: strategies to help

### 1 Starting out

In identifying your skills, it helps to think of a particular situation. 'What are you good at' is more difficult to answer than 'What did working on that project/laboratory experiment/essay show that you were good at?'

What activities have you done on this course, or on a previous one (*eg projects, seminars, presentations, research, producing essays or reports etc*)? You could also use activities from any work situation.

#### Course activities

You could think about these situations/activities, as you complete the Skills Evaluation in Section 1.4. It is based on the titles of other SkillPacks in this series, but feel free to add other skills which are important to you or your course.



**IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND IMPROVING SKILLS - Starter Level**

**1.2 Accurately assessing your skills**

When thinking about your skills, are you inclined to:



put yourself down?	
put your positive side forward?	
over-emphasise the positives or be over-confident?	
vary this according to the situation?	

It is important to judge or rate yourself accurately. You could:

- ensure you are clear about what makes a good or bad performance (the criteria)
- rate yourself and return to your rating after a few days, to amend it
- if you tend to put yourself down, rate yourself a point higher than you were first inclined to
- look for evidence. How would you 'prove' it to someone else?
- if you tend to be over-confident, you could ask others for their view.

Try looking at your skills from a different perspective, such as a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).

For example: *a presentation*

- What **strengths** do you bring to it (eg *well organised*)?
- What are your **weaknesses** (eg *nerves*)?
- What **opportunities** does it offer you (eg *becoming more confident*)?
- What **threats**, or risks, are there (eg *forget what I want to say*)?

What strategies will be most helpful to you, as you evaluate your skills?

**1.3 Seeking and using feedback**

In completing the Skill Evaluation Sheet you may find it helpful to ask others for feedback about your skills, to help you identify how good you are at something. There are many different types of feedback (eg *written comments from your tutor/employer; informal feedback from friends and fellow students*). It helps to ask specific questions.

- '*How do you think I coped with the pressure of the exams?*' could elicit useful information (eg '*You seemed to leave things until the last minute and then got quite tense about it*').
- '*Can I cope with stress?*' is a more general question which may lead to sweeping statements in reply. It invites judgemental comments which may be less helpful (eg '*Yes, very well*', '*No, you go to pieces*').

When seeking feedback it helps to:

- **listen without interrupting or defending**
- **check that you have understood** (eg '*Do you mean that ...?*)
- **weigh up which aspects of the feedback you agree with and what to take note of** (you may think the other person is wrong or has misunderstood the situation).

For more information on asking for and using feedback, look at the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Reflecting on Your Experience'.

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NOTES

### 1.4 Evaluating your skills

On the following Skills Evaluation please estimate:

- your current level of skill on a 4 point scale where 1 = 'very good' and 4 = 'in need of considerable improvement'
- your need for improvement on a 4 point scale where 1 = 'very important to improve' and 4 = 'not important to improve'  
(eg if your skill level is low in a certain area, you could consider it very important to improve it, or you could think that on your course it does not really matter).

For example:

Skill	Your estimate of your current level of skill				Evidence and examples (why you have rated your current skill level as you have)	Priority for improvement			
	1 high	2	3	4 low		1 high	2	3	4 low
<i>Organising Yourself and Your Time</i>				✓	<i>Producing an essay</i> <i>Failed to meet deadlines, had to stay up all night to get work done.</i>	✓			
<i>Negotiating and Assertiveness</i>		✓			<i>Group project</i> <i>Managed to get others to pull their weight most of the time (but not all).</i>			✓	
<i>Oral Presentation</i>	✓				<i>Presentation to course group</i> <i>Received good feedback, especially on visual aids.</i> <i>Got high grade.</i> <i>Felt confident.</i>				✓

**IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND IMPROVING SKILLS - Starter Level**
**Skills Evaluation**


NOTES

Skill	Your estimate of your current level of skill				Evidence and examples (why you have rated your current skill level as you have)	Priority for improvement			
	1 high	2	3	4 low		1 high	2	3	4 low
Action Planning									
Coping with Pressure									
Critical Analysis									
Essay Writing									
Gathering and Using Information									
Group Work									
Improving Your Learning									

**IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND IMPROVING SKILLS - Starter Level**


NOTES

Skill	Your estimate of your current level of skill				Evidence and examples (why you have rated your current skill level as you have)	Priority for improvement			
	1 high	2	3	4 low		1 high	2	3	4 low
Negotiating and Assertiveness									
Note Taking									
Oral Presentation									
Organising Yourself and Your Time									
Reflecting on Your Experience									
Report Writing									

**IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND IMPROVING SKILLS - Starter Level**


NOTES

Skill	Your estimate of your current level of skill				Evidence and examples (why you have rated your current skill level as you have)	Priority for improvement			
	1 high	2	3	4 low		1 high	2	3	4 low
Revising and Examination Technique									
Seminars, Tutorials and Meetings									
Solving Problems									
Visual Communication									
Others (please specify)									

NOTES

## 2 Developing your skills

### 2.1 Identifying where you need to improve

The skills you need to improve might be areas:

- where the evidence shows you could have carried out that skill better
- where you need to use that skill a lot on your course
- you have identified as 'threats' in a SWOT analysis (see 1.2 above)
- where feedback suggests you could do better
- where you feel under-confident
- which you identified as priorities in Section 1.4.

### 2.2 Possible sources of help

- **SkillPacks in this series.** There are SkillPacks on most of the areas listed on the Skill Evaluation Sheets. See Section 4 for details.
- **A learning centre/library.** There are materials on the skill areas listed – you may also find some under the general 'study skills' title.
- **Your lecturers.** They may be able to spend some time in class on a particular skill area.
- **Friends and other students.** Either from your year, or in later years (where they have gone through the stage you are at). What ideas do they have for improving the skill?
- **Specialists.** For example, learning centre/library staff, computing support staff.
- In addition, your university or college may offer:
  - study skills courses
  - counselling services
  - careers services.

What else would help (eg *changing your attitudes, getting more practice, setting time aside, keeping a diary to monitor what you are doing*)?

### 2.3 Action planning to improve your skills

Be as specific as possible about what you need to improve. It helps to identify targets to aim for, with dates (eg *organising yourself – a target might be to meet deadlines, or meet a deadline two days early*). See the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Action Planning'.

How could you develop your skills?

- Sometimes identifying the problem makes the solution obvious (eg *if you felt stressed because you started exam revision too late, you can plan to begin earlier in future*).
- Sometimes you may need to seek advice. Using the example of exam revision, you may need advice from a tutor about prioritising what to revise.
- Sometimes you may need more help (eg *some people feel so nervous about exams that they may need to talk it over with a specialist who can help*).

What factors might affect your plans? Possibilities are:

- current demands on your time
- priorities. What skills will you need most on your course?
- what skills will you need to use soon?
- what will affect your marks/grades most?

**IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS AND IMPROVING SKILLS - Starter Level**

We suggest that you complete the action plan below.

As you carry out your plans, it helps to keep a regular check on your progress, and revise your plans as needed (eg *circumstances change, you may have different ideas, timescales may lengthen, different priorities arise*). You could review it with somebody else (eg *a friend*) and ask them for feedback. Use the final column in the table to keep notes on your progress and what is affecting it (positively or negatively).



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Skills I wish to focus on	Target – what I want to achieve	Resources/support needed	Deadline	Progress notes
<i>Solving problems</i>	<i>Think about the problem before launching into it. Try to identify the main issues first.</i>	<i>The SkillPack on 'Solving Problems'.</i>  <i>Ask other students how they deal with similar problems.</i>  <i>Look at relevant material etc</i>	<i>next week</i>  <i>in 2 weeks</i>  <i>in 3 weeks</i>	

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### 3 Improving your self-evaluation skills

In order to do well on your course, you will need to use your skills to identify what you do well and what you could improve on. Improving your learning is your responsibility and identifying how to improve your self-evaluation skills is important. What have you used so far? How helpful was this? Why was this?



What strategies have you used?	How well did they work?	What influenced/affected this?
<i>eg feedback from others in my group</i>	<i>eg not all comments were helpful</i>	<i>eg I found it difficult to accept criticisms</i>

What else could you do to improve your self-evaluation skills?



What do you need to do to improve your self-evaluation skills?	Actions/resources needed	Deadline

## 4 References and bibliography

AGCAS (1992), *Discovering Yourself. A Self-Assessment Guide for Older Students*, AGCAS

Bingham, R. and Drew, S. (1999), *Key Work Skills*, Gower

Hawkins, P. (1999), *The Art of Building Windmills: Career Tactics for the 21st Century*, Graduate Into Employee Unit

Maxhall, P. (1998), *Unlocking Your Potential*, How to Books

### 4.1 Student skills product list

Having worked through this SkillPack you might like to know that similar structured, straightforward guidance is also available on the following topics:

- Organising Yourself and Your Time
- Note Taking
- Gathering and Using Information
- Critical Analysis
- Essay Writing
- Report Writing
- Oral Presentation
- Visual Communication
- Solving Problems
- Group Work
- Seminars, Group Tutorials and Meetings
- Negotiating and Assertiveness
- Coping with Pressure
- Revising and Examination Techniques
- Improving Your Learning
- Reflecting on Your Experience
- Action Planning

#### The Student Skills Guide Second Edition

All of the SkillPacks listed above are gathered together and are available as a paperback workbook (0 566 08430 9).

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