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This book is dedicated to my grandparents. From my granddad Clifford Bertram Butcher, I inherited my love of books and from my 'Nan', Nelly Florence Butcher, I enjoyed hours of indulgence as a child where I was the teacher and she was my pupil. This book is another opportunity for me to 'pay it forward'.

It is also dedicated to Janet Claire Deeming (1955–2018), an inspirational colleague, friend, and 'human library'. She was one of a kind and sorely missed. Jan spent her life helping other people. A total professional, her almost forensic preparation contrasted with her open, inclusive, and relaxed style of training delivery. I learned a great deal from her and we shared a lot of laughs on numerous excursions with her trusty chauffeur, Parker.

(The three underrated RCA albums by the late, great David Cassidy (1950–2017) were the playlist for writing this book.)

PREFACE

Inspiration comes from unlikely sources. It's almost as if the brain has a mind of its own – always working in the background.

The idea for a learning and study skills book based on a series of letters came from reading Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, and *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis. There's also a bit of 'dice-living', from Luke Rhinehart's *The Dice Man* thrown in to create a similar experience as the old *Dungeons and Dragons* books.



Inspiration comes not only from what we read but also from the people we meet and the things we do in life. Learning is about how we transform our knowledge and experience.

I wanted to create a book that I'd like to read and one that gives a sense of being in one of my classes or workshops.

And, you don't have to be a student to get something from this book. Many of its principles also apply to life, generally.

It's not taken nearly as long to write it as it has to live it. May it give you a shortcut to success.

Best wishes and bright moments,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Greg Hester". Below the signature is a short horizontal line.

Buying books would be a good thing if one could also buy the time to read them in: but as a rule, the purchase of books is mistaken for the appropriation of their contents.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860),
philosopher



AN INTRO OF SORTS ...

Letters to a New Student is a study skills book with a difference: you choose how to read it.

It's also brief.

As a student faced with a daunting reading list, the last thing you need is yet another book 'thick enough to stun an ox'. Or, if you need to offer to support to a student, you'll also want to cut to the chase' for helpful tips.

Reading a study skills book can save a lot of trial and error. And yet, many students resist the idea. It can be hard to give up on our own way of doing things. It's often 'better the devil you know'! And, it's also tough to accept that things could have been easier.

The book is written in plain English and in short, bite-sized pieces – Q & A letters. It offers the main principles of learning I wish I'd been told when I started out. The book aims to get you to work smarter rather than harder; to work with basic human psychology rather than fight it.

Read it from cover-to-cover. Read the short sections in *any* order to create your meaningful path. Dip in and out for 'learning hacks' to top-up your existing approach. Use it as a troubleshooting guide. Chart a random course by rolling dice! Mix and match. The choice is yours. No matter the order you read it, you get the same blueprint for learning how to learn.

If you're in a hurry, just read the 'nutshell' section and skip the rest of the intro.

The book 'in a nutshell'

- We process information better when we know what to expect. So, before you carry on, flick through to get an idea of the layout the book, then come back here.
- After this introduction, the book has 11 themed chapters: each covers an aspect of learning and studying. It takes about ten minutes to read each one.
- A chapter begins with a one-line summary and a quotation to set the scene.
- Chapters contain a series of letters based on frequently asked questions (FAQs).
- These letters are written in an informal, problem-page format – like a magazine advice column. Each one takes just two to three minutes to read.
- For each letter, there's a question from 'a student' and a response from me.
- The questions are composites of the things students have asked me over the years.
- After each Q & A, there's a key summary learning point. There are also six signposts to other letters that connect and overlap.
- To help you find your way around the book there's a contents page, at the start, with brief descriptions of the chapters. At the back, there's a standard index.
- For extra help, at the end, there's a quick-fire summary of the main learning principles. There's also an open-book exam to test what you've learned or guide your reading.

- The main chapters are numbered two to 12, so you can roll a pair of dice to decide where to start or go next. There are six signposts after each letter, if you can't choose, just use a single dice to do it for you.
- At the end of each chapter there's a checklist to help you keep track of what you've read.

Main aims

The book aims to encourage a deeper approach to learning where you take an active interest to transform the knowledge in some way to understand things for yourself, instead of just trying to 'playback' stuff like a recording device. It also aims to help you to organize and manage time more effectively, and how to play by the rules.

Main themes

To help you to meet these aims

- Foundation** – *to get fit and ready to learn* see Chapters 2 (Attitudes), 3 (Stress) and 4 (Wellbeing).
- Managing obstacles** – *to have a less bumpy ride* see Chapters 5 (Motivation), 8 (Emotions) and 12 (Support).
- Practical psychology** – *for the nitty-gritty, nuts and bolts* see Chapters 6 (Cognition), 7 (Context), 9 (Techniques), 10 (Assignments) and 11 (Revision).

Decisions, decisions

The story of how the book came about, follows.

Read on, skip it and jump to Chapter 2 (Attitudes).
Roll a pair of dice. Your choice.



The vaguely, inspiring, and informative but entirely optional and ‘skippable’ whimsical back-story

In order to change a colour, it is enough to change the colour of its background.

Michel Eugene Chevreul (1786–1889),
chemist and writer

The book’s approach came about from my personal and professional journey, first as a student, then as a teacher. It started with my return to education as a mature student – a night class in psychology. I’d always battled with the ‘no-pain-no-gain’ way of learning. It was often very painful; the gains were hit-and-miss and rarely worth all the effort. But, it didn’t occur to me there could be any other way. But this time I had the idea that psychology must have tips on studying itself. It was pre-Internet, and at that time, there were no study skills books on the market. Instead, I made do with a psychology textbook. I found a few ideas on attitudes, attention span, the context of learning, and how to take a more holistic approach to studying. This modest find inspired me to look for more hints and to apply what I found. This time around, I was more focused, more confident, wasted less time and did much, much better in the exam.

One minor event was a major turning point for me. One evening I couldn’t attend the class, and there was a power cut. Nothing to do with me! The lecturer told me the following week that while they all sat in the dark, a fellow student said, ‘If Gary were here, he’d know what to do’. I probably wouldn’t have, but it was lovely that someone thought so. Classmates had also begun to ask me questions, mostly about statistics. I was happy to help. Insights deepen when we explain things to others. That part-time course led to another, then to a degree in psychology, to teaching training, to a PhD, and a teaching job.

My approach to study skills grew as I worked with a broader range of students. My first trial by fire was teaching research methods to psychology students. Mostly, they hate statistics. The subject sparks strong negative emotions such as fear and frustration, and

because we strive to avoid such feelings, they act as barriers to learning. The students' horror was made worse as they had to learn to use a software package. I spent hours honing the 'perfect' hand-out. It was a step-by-step, booklet that aimed to allay fears, build confidence, and offer clear guidance for anything the students would need. I presumed they would read it. Halfway through the term, a student asked a question. I answered it and pointed to the relevant bit in the handout. She looked up, threw her head back, laughed, and said, 'No one reads handouts, they're just there to look pretty in your folder!' That's when I grasped that in times of stress we need the quickest fix. On the other hand, if we want to absorb information better, we need to relax. That lesson came next.

Later, I began teaching a night class in psychology for mature-aged students. When the time came to teach research methods, I broke the number one rule. For the first class, I prepared nothing. I'd also started work as a magazine advice columnist (agony uncle) and thought I'd try a less formal style in class. There was no script, just me, a few marker pens and a blank whiteboard. Instead of the usual 'trip to the morgue', students laughed about stats! Also, I got a boost in confidence as I put myself on the spot. I realized how well I knew the stuff. It also reinforced how important our attitudes are for learning. From then on, every new intake of students had the relaxed chat to kick-off the research methods course.

Without a doubt, the Internet has changed how we get information – answers in a split-second. Or sometimes we might amble along, clicking links until we find ourselves watching videos of cute cats or blackhead popping, with no idea how we got there. This book mimics this 'stream of consciousness' style. But, unlike the limitless ocean of the Internet, the covers of the book are the walls of the aquarium.

Your cover-to-cover path continues with the topic of attitudes (Chapter 2, pp. 7–14) and how they shape your view of the world and your approach to learning.

(And just in case you read this last, I hope you enjoyed the book, and best wishes in your academic career . . . and life in general.)

