

# Art of smart study

## BETHANY HIATT

Year 12 was not an enjoyable experience for Jane Genovese because she did not know how to study effectively, so she is determined to stop others making the same mistakes.

She found high school stressful and continually told herself she was stupid. It was only by trial and error that she found study techniques that helped her.

For the past four years, she has been running workshops in schools on goal setting, memory techniques, exam strategies and getting organised. She recently published a comic book on study skills called *Smart Study*.

Ms Genovese, 26, uses her personal story of failing her first assessment in her law and psychology course at Murdoch University, where her mind blanked and she achieved just 5 per cent, to inspire students.

"In high school, I thought the only way to study was reading my books over and over again," she said. "I did quite well but it was a struggle. I spent hours reading books to the point that I ruined my eyesight. I have to wear glasses now just because I did not know how to study effectively."

Even though she got into the course she wanted, she came very close to dropping out after that disastrous first test.

But learning mind-mapping and positive-thinking skills made all the difference. Last year, she graduated with first-class honours and is now working on a PhD.

Ms Genovese said excelling in exams was not just about learning and revising. Students also had to be able to retrieve easily and quickly the information they had stored away. Mind-mapping was the strategy which made the biggest difference to the way she learnt. Visualising information in a crazy, intertwined format and connecting it to something they already knew helped people retain it better.

"I was like a parrot. I could repeat all these facts but I never truly understood what I was studying," she said. "I went from learning information at a superficial level to deeply understanding the ideas."

Ms Genovese said many students had bad experiences with mind-mapping because it was often taught incorrectly. She led in by teaching students a simple technique in which they memorised a list of 10 words by connecting them to a rhyme. Mind-mapping did not work for everyone but she encouraged all students to experiment to find what worked best for them.



Jane Genovese runs workshops for students on exam study.

Picture: Dione Davidson

Students should also be aware that positive thinking was a big part of getting through Year 12. They should be careful about what they told themselves about their exams.

"A lot of them are telling themselves things like 'I can't do it, I'm going to panic, my mind is going to go blank, I'm not going to get into the uni course I want to do'," she said. "And all of that is really just a waste of their energy. It can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and really get in the way of them just getting on doing the study they need to do."

Procrastination was a huge barrier for most students. She recommended breaking tasks down into bite-sized chunks, so they didn't feel overwhelmed.

Students also had to battle against the lure of distractions such as SMS messages on their phone or the social networking site Facebook.

"They find studying some of their subjects is really painful, so they are going to want to go on Facebook," she said.

"For many students, it's better to go

to an environment where there are none of those distractions."

She also suggested that students wrote questions on flash cards with the answer on the back and then asked parents or friends to test them so they could practise retrieving information quickly.

It was important to take frequent breaks, likening students' minds to the battery in their iPod or mobile phone — they went flat.

"Study for 45 minutes, then have a five or 10-minute break," she said. "I recommend doing a bit of exercise. It doesn't have to be going to the gym, just going outside, getting some fresh air."

Students were probably under more pressure than they were when she was at school and faced more distractions. "I never had a mobile phone when I was going through high school," she said. "I think it's much harder for young people today."

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