

Effective Study Skills

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How to Study and Make the Most of Your Time

No two people study the same way, and there is little doubt that what works for one person may not work for another. However, there are some general techniques that seem to produce good results. No one would argue that every subject that you have to take is going to be so interesting that studying it is not work but pleasure. We can only wish.

Everyone is different, and for some students, studying and being motivated to learn comes naturally. If you are reading this page, it's likely that you are not one of them, but don't despair, there is hope! Your success in high school and college is dependent on your ability to study effectively and efficiently. The results of poor study skills are wasted time, frustration, and low or failing grades. It's your life, your time, and your future. All I can say, upon reflection of many years as a teacher, is that time is precious and not to be squandered, no matter what you believe right now.

This guide is designed to help you develop effective study skills. **It is not a magic formula for success in preparing for tests, written or oral assignments.** Studying any material requires work! However, by using the techniques described in this guide, and by applying yourself, you can gain a valuable edge in understanding material, preparing for tests, and, ultimately, learning. This guide contains some of the **best** and most effective techniques of successful students - students who typically have high grades in high school and college regardless of the courses they take. So read on, **think** about what you read, and prepare to become a successful student!

The value of a schedule

Before you even begin to think about the process of studying, you must develop a schedule. If you don't have a schedule or plan for studying, then you will not have any way of allocating your valuable time when the unexpected comes up. A good, well thought out schedule can be a lifesaver. It's up to you to learn how develop a schedule that meets your needs, revise it if necessary, and most important, **follow it.**

A schedule saves time

All schedules should be made with the idea that they can be revised. A good schedule keeps you from wandering off course. A good schedule, if properly managed, assigns time where time is needed, but you've got to want to do it!

Making every hour count

A schedule should take into account every class, laboratory, lecture, social event, and other work in which you engage. There are classes that have to be incorporated. You must focus on the other "free time" available and how you will use it. Make a weekly schedule and block off the 24 hour day in one hour increments. Indicate times for classes, labs, lectures, social, and work time. Also block off a period for sleeping each day. Plan time for study with the remaining time. This gives you a rough road map of the time available. Of course, you can revise your schedule as circumstances warrant.

When to study

The problem of when to study is critical. A good rule of thumb is that studying should be carried out only when you are rested, alert, and have planned for it. Last minute studying just before a class is usually a waste of time.

Making and revising a schedule

Don't be afraid to revise your schedule. **Schedules are really plans for how you intend to use your time.** If your schedule doesn't work, revise it. You must understand that your schedule is to help you develop good study habits. Once you have developed them, schedule building becomes easier.

The Process of Study

How to use your time

Time is the most valuable resource a student has. It is also one of the most wasted of resources. The schedule you develop should guide you in how to allocate the available time in the most productive manner. Sticking to your schedule can be tough. Don't dribble away valuable time. **Avoiding study is the easiest thing in the world.** It's up to you to follow the schedule you prepared. A good deal of your success in high school or college depends on this simple truth.

Where to study

You can study anywhere. Obviously, some places are better than others. Libraries, study lounges or private rooms are best. Above all, the place you choose to study should not be distracting. Distractions can build up, and the first thing you know, you're out of time and out of luck. **Make choosing a good physical environment a part of your study habits.**

Strategies

Thinking skills

Everybody has thinking skills, but few use them effectively. Effective thinking skills cannot be studied, but must be built up over a period of time. Good thinkers see possibilities where others see only dead-ends. If you're not a good thinker, start now by developing habits that make you **ask yourself questions as you read**. Talk to other students who you feel are good thinkers. Ask them what it is they do when they think critically or creatively. Often times, you can pick up valuable insights to help you become a better thinker.

The SQ3R method

The **SQ3R** method has been a proven way to sharpen study skills. **SQ3R stands for Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review**. Take a moment now and write SQ3R down. It is a good slogan to commit to memory to carry out an effective study strategy.

Survey - get the best overall picture of what you're going to study **BEFORE** you study it in any detail. It's like looking at a road map before going on a trip. If you don't know the territory, studying a map is the best way to begin.

Question - ask questions for learning. The important things to learn are usually answers to questions. Questions should lead to emphasis on the what, why, how, when, who and where of study content. Ask yourself questions as you read or study.

As you answer them, you will help to make sense of the material and remember it more easily because the process will make an impression on you. Those things that make impressions are more meaningful, and therefore more easily remembered. Don't be afraid to write your questions in the margins of textbooks, on lecture notes, or wherever it makes sense.

Read - **Reading is NOT running your eyes over a textbook**. When you read, read actively. Read to answer questions you have asked yourself or questions the instructor or author has asked. Always be alert to **bold** or *italicized* print. The authors intend that this material receive special emphasis. Also, when you read, be sure to read everything, including tables, graphs and illustrations. Often times tables, graphs and illustrations can convey an idea more powerfully than written text.

Recite - When you recite, you stop reading periodically to recall what you have read. Try to recall main headings, important ideas of concepts presented in bold or italicized type, and what graphs charts or illustrations indicate. Try to develop an overall concept of what you have read in your own words and thoughts. **Try to connect things you have just read to things you already know**. When you do this periodically, the chances are you will remember much more and be able to recall material for papers, essays and objective tests.

Review - A review is a survey of what you have covered. It is a review of what you are supposed to accomplish, not what you are going to do. Rereading is an important part of the review process. Reread with the idea that you are measuring what you have gained from the process. During review, it's a good time to go over notes you have taken to help clarify points you may have missed or don't understand. **The best time to review is when you have just finished studying something.** Don't wait until just before an examination to begin the review process. Before an examination, do a final review. If you manage your time, the final review can be thought of as a "fine-tuning" of your knowledge of the material. Thousands of high school and college students have followed the SQ3R steps to achieve higher grades with less stress.

Reading

A primary means by which you acquire information is through reading. In college you're expected to do much more reading than in high school. Don't assume just because you're "read" the assignments that is the end of it. You must learn to read with a purpose. In studying, you may read the same assignment three or four times, each time with a different purpose. **You must know before you begin reading what your purpose is, and read accordingly.**

Getting the Main Idea

Getting the main idea in reading is central to effective studying. **You must learn what the author's central idea is, and understand it in your own way.** Every paragraph contains a main idea. Main ideas are perfect for outlining textbooks. Make it a habit to find the main idea in each paragraph you read.

Extracting Important Details

Extracting important details mean that you locate in your reading the basis for main ideas. There is usually one important detail associated with every main idea. The more important details you can identify, the easier it will be to review for examinations because you have made a link between an idea and information that supports it. **The more links you can make between details and ideas, as well as ideas themselves, the more powerful will be the efforts of your study.**

Don't Read Aloud to Yourself

Generally, reading aloud to yourself does not help you study more effectively. If you move your lips while you read, you're not reading efficiently. If you read aloud or move your lips while you're reading, you are reading slowly, so stop moving your lips. **Try putting a finger over your lips.** Your finger will remind you not to move your lips. Make an effort to read faster and retain more - after a while, you'll be surprised how little effort it will take.

Taking Notes

Like reading, note-taking is a skill which must be learned and refined. Almost invariably, note taking, or the lack of it, is a constant deficiency in the study methods of many high school and college students. Learning the ingredients of good note taking is rather easy; applying them to your own situation depends on how serious you are in becoming a successful student.

Where to Keep Notes

You must learn to keep notes logically and legibly. Remember, if you can't read your own writing a few days after taking notes, they are of little use. By all accounts, the best place to keep notes is in a loose-leaf notebook. Use dividers to separate the different classes you take. Make it a habit of using your notebook to record **ALL** your notes. If you're caught without your notebook and need to take notes, always have a supply of loose-leaf paper with you. Insert your note papers into the notebook as soon as you can. Be sure to buy a good notebook, as it will get a lot of wear and tear.

Outlining Textbooks

First of all, don't underline. Use a highlighter. Experience has shown that text passages highlighted are more easily remembered than the same passages underlined. In outlining a text, don't just read along and highlight what seem to important words. That technique rarely works.

Taking Lecture Notes

Surveying, Questioning, Listening

Taking accurate and concise lecture notes is essential. Develop the habit of taking notes using appropriate methods described earlier in the **SQ3R** technique. For example, when you listen to a lecture, formulate questions as you listen. **Your main job in taking lecture notes is to be a good listener.** To be a good listener, you must learn to focus and concentrate on the main points of the lecture. Get them down, and then later reorganize them in your own words. Once you have done this, you have set the stage for successful reviewing and revising.

Reviewing and Revising

As you prepare for examinations, tests, or other assessments, you should spend time reviewing and revising your lecture notes. Begin the process by reviewing your notes right after a lecture. If you wait too long, you may discover that the notes just don't make sense. Don't hesitate to revise your notes based on the review process.

Research Notes

Any form of note-taking that requires compilation of information by categories, rather than in narrative form is best done using index cards. You can sort, edit and arrange index cards to suit your particular study needs. The most important point in using cards is to indicate the correct reference or topic at the top of the card. Use the cards for study, review, to help organize information for papers, reports, or projects. An even better idea, if you have a personal computer, is to organize your categorical information in a database. Once you set it up, finding, updating and adding new information is quite easy. If you have a printer, you can print out your notes in a variety of ways.

Taking Examinations

Objective Examinations

Surveying

Survey any objective examination to find out what types of questions are being asked. Surveying helps you to know what to expect.

Knowing the Ground Rules

Always read directions! Indicate your answers exactly the way the directions state. Make sure your answers are clear. Determine what the scoring rules for the test are and follow them to your advantage. For example, if wrong answers are penalized, don't guess unless you can reduce the choices to two.

Answering Easy Questions First

Answering easy (to you) questions first is the best strategy. If you stumble over difficult questions for too long a time, you may not be able to complete the exam.

Picking out Key Words

Objective examination questions usually contain one or more key words. A key word or group of words are those on which the truth or falsity of a statement hinges. Learn to spot the key words in the statement that define the meaning. If a statement contains two clauses, one of which is false, the whole statement is false. Usually, two-statement true-false questions are either both true or both false.

Reading Multiple-Choice Questions

Multiple choice questions are essentially true-false questions arranged in groups. Usually, only one alternative is correct. Your job is to pick the alternative that is more nearly true than the others. Read multiple-choice questions the same way as for true-false. Eliminate obvious false choices.

Reading Other Types of Questions

The methods used to answer true-false and multiple choice questions apply to matching questions as well. Always scan the entire list of alternatives before matching any. As in the other types of questions, try to identify key words in each list and test them. Completion questions require you to provide a word or phrase. When you encounter completion questions, choose your words carefully. If you don't know the answer, give it your best guess, as often times such responses get at least partial credit.

Essay Examinations

Planning your time in answering essay questions is more important than in objective type tests. The general rule is not to get carried away on one or two questions to the extent that you cannot answer the other questions in the time allowed. **Read through the entire examination first.** Get a feel for the questions you are expected to answer. If the exam allows you to choose from a number of questions, be sure to number your answers exactly to match the questions.

When you follow directions for an essay exam, pay attention to the key words the instructor has included. Such words as "list," "describe," "compare and contrast," and "outline" have special meaning. Don't "write around" the question but answer it directly. If a question asks you to list something, don't write a narrative about it. **Answering essay questions directly is always the best policy.**

After scanning the list of questions to be answered, choose the ones you know most about. A good idea is to prepare an outline of your answers. The outline will help you remember important ideas and facts to be included in your response. Another technique is to do a "**memory-dump.**" This technique is discussed in the last section of this guide, "Power Study Tips."

Good handwriting is an absolute essential. If your cursive writing is very hard to read, try printing instead. **Most instructors value clear handwriting.** Grammar, punctuation, and spelling also count. Well-written grammatically correct answers almost always receive higher grades than poorly written grammatically incorrect answers, even though the answers themselves are the same.

Writing Themes and Reports

Reviewing the Topic

Students usually have some freedom to choose the subject of themes or reports. When you make this choice, be sure that the topic is acceptable to the teacher, and is as interesting to you as possible. Another consideration is that of availability of resource material. Your task is made much easier when there is a good amount of reference and resource material available.

Using Correct Punctuation and Grammar

As in writing essays questions, good grammar and punctuation are a must. Most students use word processors to write papers. **Be sure to use the spell checker that almost all word processors have built in.** Many word processors also have some sort of grammar checker.

Learn to use a grammar checker, as it can point out serious flaws in your writing and help you become a better writer. Most grammar checkers explain the grammar rules that apply to the suggested corrections to your writing.

Gathering Materials Before You Write

Before you begin writing, assemble the materials you will need. Use index cards, notes, bibliographies, summaries, reports and reviews as part of your preparation process. Using index cards for references is an excellent way to organize your materials. Computer database programs can also help you classify and organize reference materials.

Preparing an Outline and Writing the Paper

Once you have your topic, have gathered and organized your materials, it is time to outline your paper. **Put your outline on paper! Don't make the mistake of trying to keep everything in your head.** Make your outline in the form of main headings or ideas with sub-headings fleshing out the flow of the paper. Using the outline as a guide begin writing begin by asking yourself what the paper is going to say and what conclusions you want to reach. Doing this ahead of time will help keep you focused and prevent you from straying from the purpose of the paper. Making up the outline as you go along almost always results in a less than satisfactory product. Writing is important in high school and is a key to success in college and in many professions. **Become a good writer by writing, revising, and reviewing your work.** Don't be afraid to ask other students to critique your work. Try to write in your own natural style, be aware that most good writers go through many revisions, and be prepared to do the same. Writing and test-taking are the end results of developing good study skills. There is no magic formula for success. If you follow the suggestions in this guide, apply them and think about them, you'll have taken a giant step toward becoming a successful student.

Power Studying Tips for Students

The following tips have proven to be extremely powerful guides for organizing, thinking, studying, and learning. They represent the best advice of successful students.

Study Space

Tip: Your study space should be as quiet and comfortable as possible. Avoid studying in noisy places such as cafeterias, recreation rooms, or lounges.

Tip: When studying, keep a waste basket handy.

Tip: Have a consistent place for everything, and above all, keep it there!

Tip: Have everything needed for study handy beforehand. Don't waste valuable time looking for books, notes, or other information. After you have assembled the items you need, put them where you can reach them easily.

Study Habits

Tip: Begin study no less than 30-90 minutes after a meal.

Tip: Never study within 30 minutes of going to sleep.

Tip: Prioritize! Make a list of what you intend to study, prioritize the list, and stick to it!

Tip: If possible, study no more than 30-40 minutes at a stretch. Many students retain more by studying for short periods with breaks in between. It all depends on what you're trying to study, but generally, after a period of study, take a break.

Tip: Take study breaks away from your desk or where ever you are studying. Let the break be a time to think about other things. Use some break time to reflect, not constantly review what you have just studied.

The Classroom

Tip: Distractions in the classroom are deadly. To help avoid distractions, sit near the front of the class. You're less likely to miss something important, and there are far less distractions at the front than any other location.

Tip: Think! Thinking is one of the most important things you can do in class. If you just sit there passively, and not think, class can be deadly. Think about what the teacher is saying **BEFORE** writing down anything. Writing down each word is a WASTE OF TIME. Reorganize in your mind what the teacher says, and then write it down. This way you will be connecting the teacher's words with **HOW** you think. If you do this, your notes will make a lot more sense later on.

Tip: Pay attention to the course outline or syllabus. Generally, important points and materials are referenced here and repeated. Don't be afraid to ask the teacher if there is something you don't understand. Most teachers will be glad to clarify for you.

Preparing for Class

Tip: Efficient students do not underline! Underlining is not a productive way to emphasize textbook material. It's best to use a highlighter if possible.

Tip: Read the table of contents of your texts carefully. If the textbooks have chapter summaries, read them first! If you don't understand the material from the summaries, go back and highlight. Take notes on what you have highlighted and review your notes. **Tip:** Break study material into short segments of length dependent on its difficulty. Remember, concise notes are more powerful than copious notes. Think about the material! Then take notes on what you don't know or are not sure of.

Test Taking

Tip: For essay examinations, try the "**memory dump**" technique. If permitted, write down everything you've memorized - facts, names, dates, ideas, events, and so on **BEFORE** you do anything else. Sometimes reading through the essay questions can distract you from what you've studied. The "**memory dump**" technique requires that you write down everything possible **BEFORE** you begin writing essay answers. This way, you are less likely to forget something important.

A Final Word

The study skills presented here depend on one thing, and that is your willingness to **WANT** to improve and do well in school. If you really don't want to make the effort and sacrifice, no amount of suggestions, ideas, or outlines can help much. You are the one who is responsible for your education, and effective study skills can help you. To that end, one last word of advice -- **work smart, not hard.**