

The Learning Process: Effective Study Skills

[For the most part, do you prefer to study alone or with others? In a paragraph, explain why.]



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KEY TOPICS

- Practicing effective learning techniques
- Taking advantage of your college's resources
- Preparing for and getting the most out of class
- Preparing for and taking exams

Linking to Previous Experience



Becoming an effective student is much like doing well at any job: it requires energy, focus, time, and commitment. If you are coming to college straight from high school, you probably remember many of the habits that helped (or hurt) your studies. If you've been out of school for a while, some academic routines may have faded from memory. However, no matter how well you once did in school or how long it has been since you've written a paper or taken a test, there are ways to improve your chances of success in college.

This online chapter will help you take advantage of the resources your institution offers, maximize your classroom experience, and prepare successfully for tests.

Taking Advantage of Your College's Resources

Your school has many resources available to help you succeed, but you will have to seek them out. If you're new to campus, orient yourself, and make sure you can find your way around. Instead of stopping five people as you frantically try to locate the building your first class is in, find a campus map online, in your student catalog, or at the student center. Hang onto the map because you may use it many times—even next semester or next year.

Helpful Places

Before classes begin, help reduce your anxiety level by visiting campus locations that you will probably need to find at some point—for example, the offices of the registrar (for course changes and transcripts), financial aid, the dean of students, career services, and your advisor. Also, locate the library, the bookstore, the buildings where your classes meet, and, of course, the cafeteria(s). As the semester progresses, you may find it useful to visit other support services, such as reading, learning, math, and writing centers, where you can find specialized help in these areas. Many students benefit from the additional hands-on tutoring that such centers provide, especially when they seek help early in the term, limiting the need to play catch-up.

Most college campuses offer one or more computer labs, which are open to students (with IDs or passwords) for course-related work. Many schools require or allow you to set up a student account so that you can register online, track your grades and bills, communicate with professors, and participate in online discussions with classmates. Campus libraries give students computer access for research and writing. Many writing centers offer computer access for students in (or waiting for) appointments with tutors, and some writing centers have specific computer programs that help fix grammar/mechanics problems and other common errors in composing and revising drafts.

Your college bookstore(s) will usually offer all textbooks required for your classes at competitive prices. Other bookstores and online retailers may carry course texts for a better price, but they are less likely to exchange or return texts if you change or drop classes.

Helpful People

There are at least two important “people” resources that you should become familiar with: your counselor and your professors. Even if you already have a

solid idea of what you want out of college, a counselor can give you additional insights into what the school can offer and how best to arrive at your destination. Most counselors have years of experience in guiding students, many of whom had goals and dreams similar to yours.

Professors can be another valuable resource. Your teachers' primary goal is to help every student in their classes learn as much course content as possible and think ever more critically. Most professors are quite willing to work with students, so you should feel comfortable talking with them in and outside the classroom. All instructors have posted office hours, and many are happy to see students even beyond those posted times.

ACTIVITY 1 WORKING TOGETHER: *Comparing Notes on Campus Resources*



With group members, discuss what you have learned so far about finding your way around your school and locating resources available to students. List what your group considers the five most important places on campus, and explain how to find them. Next, list the five most important resources your college makes available to students, explaining why each is so useful.



Preparing for the First Week of School

The start of a semester is usually an exciting and confusing time: many new faces passing in the halls, students milling around the campus commons, people realizing that they don't know where their next class is or that they have left books, pens, paper, or class schedules at home. You will be able to enjoy the excitement more if you reduce your confusion, and that is best done by thinking through what you will need to do for those first few classes.

Supplies

First, you will certainly need some standard school supplies like notebooks, printer paper, file/pocket folders, pens/pencils, highlighter, stapler/paper clips, textbooks, and a book bag, backpack, or wheelie. A flashdrive can also come in handy, as some classrooms may allow laptops or provide computers for everyone's use. It will make your job as a student easier if you organize your notebook(s) and folders by course, allowing enough room for each. Remember that college classes are full of information—daily discussions, handouts, your own writing, and research materials—so you should be prepared to handle all this paper and/or data. A daily planner or calendar with enough room to write notes can also help you stay organized and meet deadlines.

ACTIVITY 2 WORKING ONLINE: *Using an Online Calendar*



On About.com, read about multiple free options for keeping track of your schedule and course assignments online: <http://websearch.about.com/od/dailywebsearchtips/qt/dnt0424.htm>. Many online calendars allow you to share select information with friends, classmates, and instructors.



The First Class

On your first day of class, you should come prepared to work, even though this session will probably focus more on orienting students than covering specific course content. Bring your textbook(s). Even if you don't use it in class, there is a good chance you will have an assignment from it due by the next class meeting. Buying your books before class meets ensures that you will have them and be able to do your work. If you delay your purchase, you may find that the bookstore has sold out of a text you need.

Arriving at class a few minutes early is a good habit to develop. When you are early, you have a chance to find a seat that you prefer, and you can get comfortably situated: hanging up your jacket, finding the right textbook, and preparing to take notes. If you know people in the class, you will have a few minutes to socialize. Coming early also allows you to ask brief questions of your professor. Finally, being ahead of time keeps you from being late, so you avoid disrupting class, embarrassing yourself, and annoying your professor. In some classrooms tardiness may even affect your grade.

During your first and perhaps second class meetings, you can expect to cover the course syllabus, which will lay out the ground rules for the class: what the instructor expects of you, what you can expect of the instructor, textbooks, course objectives, major assignments, due dates, and method of evaluation. If any points are not clear, this is a good time to begin asking questions. As a student you will often need to have your teacher clarify points he or she is making. Asking questions is a strength, not a weakness. It is expected classroom behavior and shows your professor that you care enough about the course to try to understand all of it.

Classroom Behavior

Positive classroom behaviors may seem obvious. You have chosen to spend time in a room with your instructor, a person who knows and cares a lot about a subject and who has an obligation to help you understand it. It follows then that you should want to listen carefully to what your professor says, take notes, and participate in classroom discussions. You and your fellow students have much to contribute to the class, but it often takes an effort on your part. When you are tired from work, family, and other responsibilities, it is sometimes hard to remain attentive for an hour or more, especially when the topic seems difficult, boring, or both. However, what you get out of a course, including a grade, is the result of many weeks of trying and succeeding at staying focused.

You can show that you are tuned into the class session (and actually increase your interest in the material) by noticing and taking control of your body language. Are you slouched in your seat and staring at the ceiling or out the window? Are your eyes glazing over as you drift in and out of sleep—or is your head down? These behaviors send a clear message: "I don't care about this. Please, someone save me!" Make your body language work for you. Sit erect, make eye contact with your professor, and shift your attention to other students when they contribute to the discussion. If you *act* engaged in class, you are more likely to hear something interesting and *become* engaged.

In general, positive behaviors in a classroom are common sense and common courtesy. Most of us don't want to insult people we work with or even those we meet casually, and a classroom is primarily a place of work.

To maximize your classroom experience:

- Avoid more than a few passing words (even when whispering) with other students while a lecture or discussion is in progress.
- Keep questions and comments related to the class discussion.
- Turn off your cell phone.
- Don't leave the class unless there is an emergency; then notify your professor before you go.

TAKE NOTES ON A COMPUTER

Consider taking class notes on your laptop or a classroom computer. You'll save paper and have easy access to any of your notes, anytime. Resist the urge to browse the Web and remember to turn off your IM. *Tip:* Be sure to always back up your files on a network or a flashdrive—or just e-mail the notes to yourself. That way if the machine fails, you won't lose your work. ●



Group Work

On occasion, your professor may assign you to work on a project in groups. Many instructors feel that in certain situations, students can make even more progress in groups than by themselves. Working in groups can also build a sense of community. Some students are naturally inclined to collaborate with others this way, and some resist it, preferring to work solo. Try to be open to both types of learning because other people can challenge your assumptions and offer ideas or different perspectives you might not have considered. Group work can be both fun and helpful, but you must stay on task. Leave talk of the party, game, or vacation for later.



After-Class Routine

When class is over, you may have to run to another one, but try to find some time as soon as possible to review the day's lesson. Go back to your notes and the sections in your textbook that were covered in class. Do you understand the key concepts presented; do the examples given make sense? Can you give your own examples or create a comparison similar to one you learned in class? For instance, if you were discussing the concept of *transitions* in a composition course, your instructor would have explained the methods for moving a reader smoothly through your writing by linking sentences securely. On reviewing the lesson, you might create your own examples, such as the couplings that hold train cars together or a log spanning a creek to help hikers cross.

It also helps to discuss key parts of a class session with other people, like classmates, especially if you have questions. They may be able to help clarify a point. If you haven't yet met anyone from a class, try explaining what you learned that day to a friend or family member. If you can make a key concept clear to them, you probably understand it. Again, don't overlook your professor as a resource. He or she has regular office hours and outside of those may be happy to discuss any point you are unsure about. There might even be time immediately after class for a mini-conference in the hall. Additional help is available in the various support centers around campus, such as your writing center. The point is to establish a routine early on that will help you learn and succeed in your schoolwork.

After you have firmly fixed one day's lesson in your mind, you should begin thinking about the next lesson, including completing your homework. If you browse through an assignment quickly while you are still on campus, you may find some part that is unclear and be able to get help right away. This approach works better than waiting till 10 o'clock the night before class meets and then finding that you don't understand the assignment.

ACTIVITY 3 WORKING TOGETHER: *Succeeding in a College Classroom*



With group members, discuss what kinds of behaviors will help a student succeed or not in a college class. List five positive and five negative student habits. Now discuss why students may act in ways that make academic success difficult. How can these negative habits be overcome?



Preparing for the First Exam

After several weeks of school, you can anticipate your first examination. If taking exams makes you nervous, you aren't alone: few people enjoy being tested. However, if you have been going to class regularly, paying attention, and reviewing your daily work, you are probably more prepared than you realize. Still, there are useful strategies for doing well on exams of all sorts, including essay exams. Keep in mind that your purpose when testing is to show your professor how much you have learned about a topic, and realize that you are unlikely to fool your professor about how much you really know.

What to Do in the Days before the Exam

Here are some strategies that will help you prepare for exams ahead of time:

1. **Be sure that you know *exactly* what the exam is to cover:** units, chapters, and pages. Your instructor will usually give you a study guide to focus your efforts. Using this guide will make your job easier.
2. **Clarify what you are expected to do with the chapter information.** Most exams ask for more than just memorization. You will often be expected to summarize, compare, establish causes and effects, tell how something works, define important terms, and evaluate. If you are unsure about how to focus your studies, ask your professor in class to explain further, or arrange an office visit.
3. **If possible, find a study buddy or a small group.** Discussing the material with others can fill in gaps in your comprehension, and the sheer repetition will help in memorization.
4. **Review textbook material.** Look to chapter headings, subheadings, introductions, conclusions, summary boxes, and bold and italicized fonts for important information. If you have annotated your text, write out and organize your notes.
5. **Review your notes.** Look for points that appear several times, indicating their significance to your instructor, and you will probably notice an occasional broad hint, such as: "Remember this for the exam." Highlight your notes and cross-reference them where possible. Linking ideas will help you remember them.
6. **Drill yourself on key terms, ideas, and definitions, and say them aloud.** You may not like pronouncing *carbon sequestration* or *bioethanol*, but if these subjects are likely candidates for the exam, you should learn them—including their spellings.
7. **If your instructor has repeated a brief quotation several times, try to memorize it.** It may help you answer a key question.
8. **After you have prepared yourself by studying as much as you can, try to relax to minimize pretest jitters.** If you can avoid cramming late into the night, you will be more rested and will think more clearly during the exam. One way to calm yourself the night before is to imagine yourself taking the test. Mentally put yourself in your usual seat in the classroom; visualize the room, the students, the teacher; and imagine that you are taking the test—and doing well.



HINT

See Chapter 2 for tips on effective reading.

What to Do during the Exam

If you have prepared to the best of your ability and rested well the night before, you are as ready as you can be for the exam. Try to arrive at class earlier than usual to set up your workspace. Lay out whatever supplies you need: calculator, dictionary, pen/pencil, paper, and so forth. Test time is valuable; you don't want to waste any of it.

Here are a few points to consider during the exam:

1. **Expect instructions.** Anticipate that some class time will be spent explaining the exam.
2. **Ask exam-related questions.** While papers are being distributed, ask any last question, but don't expect a one-minute summary of three weeks of classroom instruction.
3. **Clarify the instructions.** When you get the exam, listen carefully to the instructions, and then ask your teacher to clarify any point you are unsure of.
4. **Preview the exam.** Skim the whole exam to be sure you understand the questions and point value. Decide how much time to spend on each question, considering its point total; write out the time by the question, and try to stick to it. If you have no idea how to answer a high-point question, don't give up on it, but move to the other questions, hoping they will jog your memory.
5. **Analyze each question.** Circle key words and phrases, number the parts of the question that need to be answered, and notice the command verbs, such as *define*, *contrast*, or *evaluate*. If the question is confusing, ask your instructor to clarify. However, don't ask, "Can I answer this question any way I want to?" Instead tell your teacher how you think the question should be answered.
6. **Outline your answers.** If a question requires a long paragraph or short essay response, take a moment to list your ideas in a "scratch outline" (see p. 31 in your text) before you begin drafting.
7. **Begin by restating the question.** Begin a paragraph response with a topic sentence that *restates* the exam question, and for an essay include a thesis sentence that does the same. Notice how the following exam question from a nursing class has been restated to introduce the exam response:

Exam question:

Explain how the AIDS virus suppresses a human being's immune system, and discuss several common effects of the virus.

First sentence of exam response:

The AIDS virus suppresses the human immune system in several ways and has three primary effects on victims.

8. **Be specific.** In your response, include as much specific information as possible: detailed examples, facts, statistics, names, dates, and quotations. Also, explain how this information relates to the exam question.
9. **Pay attention to the clock.** Check the time as you write so that you don't run out of time to complete the exam.
10. **Check your work.** Save a few minutes to edit, especially for misspellings of key terms and other major mechanical errors.
11. **Don't give up.** If you run out of time, you may still get partial credit for an answer if you outline the main points that you would have included in a full response.

How to Deal with Test-Taking Anxieties

No matter how well prepared you are for an exam, some anxiety is inevitable. However, you don't want your worries to affect your performance. A few common student concerns follow, along with some suggestions for dealing with them.

- **“What if I have an anxiety attack and feel as if I know nothing on the exam?”** If you have reviewed a fair amount and attended class regularly, it is unlikely that you know *nothing* on the exam. Take a few deep breaths and refocus. You may need to leave the class for a moment (with your instructor's permission) to regroup. Come back to the exam, skim the questions again, locate one that you can say something about, and begin an answer. Remind yourself that in the larger scheme of life, this exam will not be a deathbed regret.
- **“Am I the worst student in class? Everyone is leaving ahead of me.”** People work at different speeds, so finishing a test last is nothing to worry about. Often, early completion of an exam means that a student did *not* do well, rather than the reverse. Take advantage of every minute available to write and revise your work.
- **“What if I can't finish the exam in time?”** Remind yourself that you have taken all possible steps to deal with the time question: you have reviewed thoroughly, skimmed the exam, planned time for each question, and tracked your progress. You can outline any part you can't complete. What is important is being as prepared as possible.
- **“Should I use information that I'm not sure is right?”** No. If you are not reasonably sure of facts, statistics, quotations, and so on, leave them out.
- **“What do I do when I'm stuck on a question, with no ideas coming?”** Sometimes you simply cannot remember the information you need to answer a question. When this happens, it's best to move forward, returning if time allows.

ACTIVITY 4 WORKING TOGETHER: *Sharing Exam-Taking Techniques*



With group members, discuss the material on Preparing for the First Exam, and compare the suggestions to your own experience. As a group list five strategies you think are valuable in studying for a test and five you would follow while taking one.



ACTIVITY 5 WORKING ONLINE: *Exploring Various Learning Styles*



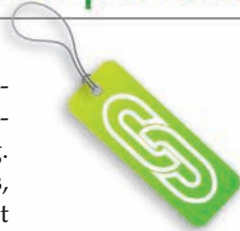
Are you a visual learner? Or do you learn better by hearing information? Do you tend to remember things best by *doing* them? There are a wide variety of learning styles; if you can identify the ways in which you learn best, you can better strategize how to read, study for exams, and



approach written assignments. Take the Learning Styles Online quiz at <http://www.learning-styles-online.com/inventory/> to find out if you are a visual, aural, verbal, physical, logical, social, and/or solitary learner. This website also provides information about each learner type. For additional help applying study skills, visit the Study Guides and Strategies site: <http://www.studygs.net/>.

Linking to Future Experience

The learning skills emphasized in this chapter will serve you well in any classroom and beyond in the working world. Almost any profession—be it entrepreneur, nurse, landscaper, or musician—requires continuous on-the-job learning. You'll be expected to analyze and evaluate new information, to solve problems, and to allocate your time wisely. A job interview, a new position, or an important meeting each requires that you plan ahead and approach the situation prepared, confident, and ready to work effectively with others.



Chapter Summary

1. With effort, anyone can become a better learner.
2. Colleges offer many resources to help students succeed.
3. Before classes begin, learn where all the buildings are that you will visit regularly.
4. Your counselor and professors can help you succeed in college. Visit them.
5. Gather and organize your school supplies before the first class session.
6. Practice positive classroom behaviors that will help you stay focused and connected to the course material.
7. Working with others can help you learn more efficiently.
8. Establish a routine for reviewing each day's lesson and previewing your homework.
9. There are useful strategies for preparing for and taking an exam, but they require time, organization, and focus.
10. Exams make most people anxious; try not to let worries affect your performance.