



# **Academic and Study** **Strategies**

## Academic and Study Strategies

### Why work on study skills?

As a college student, you will notice times when two friends put in the same amount of work in a course but get very different grades. This is usually because the student who gets the better grade knows how to effectively use his or her study.

Successful students have learned that there is more to studying than reading textbooks and memorizing notes. They know that there are certain strategies and approaches to studying - to taking notes, taking tests, talking to instructors - simple, common sense things that can make a big difference in the results they get and in the amount of time they need to spend studying.

The study skills strategies presented here can give you the benefit of others' experience so you can get off to a good start in college and avoid making the same old mistakes that students often make.

Following these practical guidelines based on psychologists' research will make studying more enjoyable and rewarding for you because you will get more done in less time and your efforts will pay off.

But remember, habits are hard to break and you may have a hard time changing your old study habits overnight. So don't get discouraged if you fall back into old habits and can't seem to put all these strategies to immediate use.

Just study these guidelines and try to implement more and more of them into your study routine, and gradually they will become established habits.

Another thing to keep in mind is that no matter how you approach it, studying is hard work and there's no way around it. There are no super students or magic shortcuts. Good students work hard. So if you have trouble making yourself sit down and study, it may help to realize everyone else does too.

What it finally comes down to is getting to work and avoiding distractions. When it's time to study it's not time to call a friend, go downtown or do laundry.

One way of getting started is to get started. Sit down. Open your books. Look over your notes. Begin with an easier, more automatic task and gradually start work on a harder one.

Once you've started, be persistent. Don't give up the minute you encounter something hard or frustrating. Keep going and you'll gradually settle down and start concentrating.

### Getting Motivated

Some students spend all their time in college fighting it - complaining about how they hate school and finding excuses for not doing their work. When it's all over, they've spent their entire four years with a negative attitude, avoiding what they should do.

When they leave they are no further ahead than when they came. In fact their bad college record will hurt them on the job market and may keep them from getting into graduate or professional school.

Taking a long-range view of things can help you put your college years in a different perspective. If you think about it, college is just four years of your life, but you've got over 40 years to work after graduation. And how well you do in those four years in college can be a big factor in determining how you spend the rest of your working life.

It sometimes helps to remember that what you do in college you are doing for you and for no one else. Don't think you're studying to please your parents or your teachers. Study to please yourself. Set goals for yourself. Ultimately it's your future that's involved, and you that will benefit from your work.

### Taking Responsibility for Yourself

College is different from high school in many ways and students often find that what worked for them in high school doesn't work as well in college. One way to adjust better to college life is to be aware of these differences and to develop new ways of behaving as a student. For many students the biggest adjustment problem is getting used to taking total responsibility for getting their work done.

One of the good things about college is the increased freedom and independence - no one stands over you watching your every move. But this freedom can make it tempting to just coast along.

It may seem like there are fewer daily assignments than in high school and you may go for weeks in a class without having a test or a paper due. But even though the teacher isn't checking up on you, you are expected to be doing the reading and keeping up the course on your own. If you're absent, it's up to you to make up for what you've missed.

In College your success in a course and in managing your time is up to you. You are in charge of your life and your future.

### Setting Goals You Can Believe In

One reason some students can't get themselves to study in college is that they don't really know why they're in

school or what they want to do. They have no specific career in mind and they get discouraged when they look around and everyone else but them seems to know exactly what they want to do.

It might help these students to realize that many students are unsure about their majors: half of UI students change their major at some point. So it may take some students a few years to discover what they really want to do.

But in the meantime it's important not to let their grades slip. Otherwise they may find that once they've decided on something they'd like to do, it's too late to improve their grade-point so that they can get into that major or graduate school or do whatever they need to do to achieve their goals.

So even if you're not really sure at first why you're making the effort, it's best to study now so that when you discover a goal, you won't have wrecked your chances or achieving it.

And in the meantime, you can see your academic advisor about how you can get help with choosing a major and defining career goals.

### **Set Realistic Short-Term Goals**

Even if you have no clear long-range goals in mind, it's best to set your own temporary goals. As you know, most people do better when they are working toward a goal they set for themselves and believe in. Since goals you choose for yourself are the most motivating, the key is to set goals that will motivate you.

In doing this, take things one step at a time. Don't aim only for long-range goals like graduating or becoming a pharmacist or accountant. Instead choose realistic, short-term goals. Set doing well on a particular exam or in a particular course as your goal. Short-term goals are more manageable and keep you focused on what you need to do right now.

You also need to be realistic about what goals you set. If you are a perfectionist or set your goals too high, you will get discouraged when you fail. Shoot for a "B" in a course instead of an "A" if that seems more realistic.

Once you've got specific, short-term goals in mind, you can make step-by-step plans to achieve them instead of worrying about how you'll ever pass your courses or get all your work done.

### **Getting Interested**

You will often hear students say that the reason they are doing poorly in a course is that they are not interested in the subject. But complaining about how you hate poetry or can't stand math will not get you anywhere when it comes to doing well in a class.

In fact, one of the surest ways to succeed in a course is to try to develop an interest in what you are studying. It's true that you'll probably resent having to take certain required courses. But since you have to take them anyway, you might as well be open-minded and try to like the subject.

You'll enjoy the course more, you'll learn more, and you'll get a better grade.

### **Get Involved**

One way to make a course more interesting is to be sure you've read the assigned material before coming to class so that you know what's going on and can get involved in the lecture or discussion.

This means not giving up on the reading because you find it boring. Keep charging through until you get to an interesting part. Try to think of reasons why you might be interested in the material instead of dwelling on reasons why you're not.

Most students report that the more they learn about a subject, the less boring it becomes.

### **Think Positive**

In class, adopt a positive attitude. Pay attention. Follow the lecture or discussion closely. Act as though you're interested and you may get interested. Ask questions during discussion.

It's surprising how much more interested you can get just by paying attention and joining in class discussion.

### **Friends vs. Studying**

Contrary to what many students believe, in college you don't have to choose between having a good time with your friends and studying. In fact, real freedom is having your work under control so you can relax and have fun. Yet one reason some students find it hard to study is because their friends don't study or go to class and are always encouraging them to go out. They feel that doing their work will make them unpopular with their friends.

If you find yourself in this position, you might want to ask yourself, "Are my friends forcing me to make a choice between spending time with them now and my future success?" (Walter and Siebert, 1976,7). Then think about your future. In a few years you'll graduate and be away from these friends. What will matter then? Who will your friends be? What will you be doing? Will you be glad you stuck to your goals and went ahead and went to class and did your work?

If you find you are wasting a lot of time with your friends, try to get to know some better students. Their study habits and routines may rub off on you.

## Internalizers vs. Externalizers: Which Type of Student Are You?

Psychologists have found that when it comes to learning and success in school, there are two basic types of people: internalizers and externalizers.

Internalizers believe that they can control what happens to them so they try to do their best. Externalizers believe that they have little control over what happens to them and tend to blame others for their mistakes. They don't really try because they don't believe it will do any good.

Externalizers are not good students. They have a negative attitude and think getting good grades is mainly a matter of luck. They may think they are trying but they give up easily and always have an excuse: "I would be able to study if my roommate wasn't so noisy," "I would do better if the teacher didn't have it out for me," "I can't do well in college because I didn't learn anything in high school."

Internalizers are successful students who take a more positive attitude. If they fail at their goal, they don't give up or blame others. They ask themselves what they can do to do better next time. Then they set out step-by-step to achieve their goals.

If you think you tend to have a negative "externalizer" attitude, try to get into the habit of thinking more positively and of accepting responsibility for your own behavior. Realize you are in control of how things go for you and that you can improve things.

Instead of complaining about everything that's wrong with a course you're doing poorly in, talk to a tutor about how you can do better and start taking steps to get your work done.

## Avoiding Games Losers Play

It's okay to feel sorry for yourself once in a while, but if you do it frequently you may be playing a game. A game occurs when a person follows a sequence of actions or words that manipulates others into responses that provide a hidden psychological payoff. The moves are superficially plausible, but the real motive is hidden.

Game playing is like "conning" someone but differs in that a "con" is conscious whereas game playing usually goes on without conscious awareness.

The games students play often have payoffs that prevent them from being successful in school. It may be that you play some games that hinder your effectiveness.

## Yes, But

A good example to start with is the "Yes, but..." game. "I can't seem to concentrate."

"You could study in your room instead of in the cafeteria."

"Yes, but it's too noisy there."

"Why don't you shut your door and play your radio."

"Yes, but my roommate always talks to me."

"Why don't you..."

"Yes, but..."

On the surface the person seems to be asking questions about how to keep from being distracted. The real purpose of the interaction, however, is to prove to others that nothing they suggest is going to work.

## Ain't It Awful...?

Minimartyr is walking down the hall after class and, as usual, starts a conversation by saying:

"Ain't it awful the way she loads work on us?"

"Ain't it awful the way she grades?"

".....how the tests are written?"

".....how the lectures are so boring?"

".....the way we have to sit in those hard seats?"

## Wooden Leg

"How can anyone expect me to do well with the trouble I have? If you had the problems I have - my parents and I get into these arguments on the phone each week; I have these headaches; I can't sleep; I'm broke..."

"I know someone who has lots of the same problems."

"My problems are worse. No one has problems as bad as mine."

## Harried

Whirlwind takes on everything and volunteers for more.

A dynamo of activity, Whirlwind works frantically on dozens of projects. There are meetings to attend, phone calls to make, people to see, and details to arrange.

Studying? "Have to put that off until later." Whirlwind is busy but doesn't get much accomplished. Remember: The more goals you have, the less likely you are to reach any of them.

## A QUICK LIST OF STUDY TIPS

Here is a quick summary of some key steps in becoming an active, successful learner.

### Getting Going

1. Make a list of things to do.
2. Identify the tasks that are most important.
3. Adopt realistic (not perfectionist) goals for each task.
4. Break each task down into a number of smaller pieces or steps.
5. Develop a schedule for completing these steps.
6. Begin working on your important tasks, taking a small step at a time.
7. Record your progress toward your goals.
8. Reward yourself for completing major parts of your tasks by allowing yourself to do something that you particularly enjoy.
9. If you find yourself procrastinating on a task, break the task down into even smaller parts, then take the first step toward completing it.

**In Class**

1. Take notes. Check them with your TA or tutor.
2. Skim notes from previous lecture.
  - Refresh your memory.
  - Formulate questions.
3. During lecture, ask questions of yourself when pauses allow.
  - Why did the professor say that?
  - What are the major points in what he or she just said?
4. Formulate questions you want to ask the instructor.
  - Ask in class if time allows.
  - Jot the question down for your quiz section or for the instructor's office hours.

**Reading**

1. Don't get hung up on reading speed alone.
2. Familiarize yourself with the text on day one.
3. Preread a chapter before it's discussed or before you're going to read it.
  - Examine its structure.
  - Skim subheadings, summaries, topic sentences and bold face type.
4. Involve yourself in your reading.
  - Ask questions of yourself.
  - Underline.
  - Take notes.

**Studying for Exams**

1. Rephrase material in your own words.
2. Find examples of material.
3. Form seminars and discuss material with others.
4. Think up possible exam questions and answer them mentally, verbally, or in writing.
5. Overlearn! Don't stop at memorizing.
6. Give yourself time for a quick review before your exam.

**Stupid**

"Oh, no? There I go again. Look how dumb I am. I always do stupid things. I always find some way to foul things up! I always make some dumb mistake."

**True**

If It Weren't for Him or Her

"I could get good grades in math if it weren't for the instructor."

"I would have a good grade average if it weren't for my advisor making me take those tough courses."

"I would go to class if the instructor weren't so boring."

"I could study better if it weren't for my roommate."

"If it weren't for him or her" is often played by students who want to justify why they aren't attending classes or studying.

These games all have predictable patterns and the same thing happens again and again. The student doesn't change or find a way to deal with what happens. The

gains from playing a game are worth more than whatever costs there may be - including not being successful as a student.

**Steering Clear of the "I Give Up" Trap**

Don't get discouraged and fall into the "I Give Up" trap. Some students use failure as an excuse for not trying anymore.

Learning effective study skills such as how to write papers and take good notes takes time and practice. If something doesn't work the first time and it seems like your efforts didn't pay off, don't give up. See your tutors and instructors and keep trying.

If your teachers and tutors see that you are really trying, they will be more willing to help you do better next time.

**Making the Most of Your Study Time****Finding Study Time**

The two main things to learn about managing your study time are how to find time to study and then how to make the most of every hour you study.

Although participating in athletics/music/work/etc. can be very time consuming, it is usually not an excuse for not finding time to study. Many other UI students work part-time jobs for 20 to 30 hours a week while in school and still find time to study. And many do well in both their extracurricular and in their school work.

Studying works best when you find regular times and places to work. Find a place to study where you will not be distracted. If it is too noisy in your room, try the library or a lounge. If you are assigned to the Learning Resource Center, you might as well really use the time there to get work done.

The main thing to remember is not to waste your study time. Don't stretch an hour's worth of work over an entire evening. Sitting at a desk for two or three hours means nothing if you're not getting anything done. Two hours of concentrated study is worth more than several hours of halfhearted effort spent socializing and daydreaming.

Taking a 15 to 20 minute break every two hours will help you maintain your concentration.

**Use "Hidden Hours"**

While it's a good idea to set aside big blocks of time to study, remember that there are also "hidden hours" during the day that can be put to use for study time such as the twenty minutes when you are waiting to go to lunch or the time between classes.

Use the hours between your classes to study for the class you just finished or to prepare for the next class. It's easy

to waste this extra time. Fifteen minutes or a half hour of studying here or there adds up and can give you more free time for other things later.

### List Goals

When you begin a study session, make a quick list of what you intend to get done. Setting definite goals will help you organize your time. Be specific and realistic in setting goals - not "Study history," but rather "Read history chapters two and three."

### Keep in Touch

Keep in touch with all your classes. Study your class notes as soon as possible after each class period. Don't fall into the habit of working only on the courses you find the easiest or the most interesting. Make a regular weekly review of material in all your courses by glancing over a few pages of notes.

You will be surprised how much this occasional review will help you remember the material when it's time to study for exams.

### Plan Ahead

Check your schedule frequently to note when papers and exams are coming up. When you have a paper or other assignment due, don't put off starting work on it. Begin it or talk to a tutor about it and it will seem easier to handle. Once a task is started, it always seems more manageable.

Don't let worrying about all the work you have to do take the place of doing it. This kind of worry can turn into an excuse for not getting anything done. Instead of worrying, get started.

### Borrow, Don't Steal

And remember, borrow time, don't steal it. When an unexpected activity comes up that takes up time you had planned to use for studying, find another time in your schedule to study to make up for the time you've lost.

### Doing Your Best in the Classroom

#### Case Out Your Courses

Good students don't just sit back and take things as they come in a course. They find out at the beginning of the semester exactly what is required of them and what they will need to do to succeed in the class.

#### A "Class" Act

Sometimes, without really meaning to, students give teachers the impression that they don't care about their classes or that they dislike them. On the other hand, good classroom behavior can demonstrate to a teacher that you are trying to do your best in a class.

\* During the first week of classes **find out the answers to these key questions** and write them in your notes so that

you and your tutors will have the information when you need it.

- **How much does the teacher stress attendance and class participation?**
  - **Are points taken off for work handed in late?**
  - **Which chapters in the text will be covered?**
  - **Should you read the chapter before the lecture each time?**
  - **When will exams be given and what material will be covered?**
  - **What kinds of exams will be given? Essay, multiple choice, or take home?**
  - **What other work is required and when is it due?**
  - **What, overall, does the instructor seem to want you to learn from the course?**
  - **Where is the instructor's office and when can you see him or her for help in the course?**
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### Be There

The surest way to show a teacher that you could care less about a course is to miss lots of classes. Although many instructors do not say so directly and do not take attendance, class attendance is very important to most of them.

Few things are more damaging to grades than missing class. One study found that 85% of students with a "B" average or higher were "always or almost always present," while 45% of students with a "C" average or lower were "often absent" (Walter and Siebert, 1976,62).

If you miss class, you are telling the teacher that you don't care enough about his or her class to bother to come to it. And when it comes time for grading, chances are the instructor will not feel like bothering with you, no matter what you've done to make up for your absences.

If you do miss class, show that you are concerned. Ask the instructor what you can do to make it up. Find out from other students what you missed and borrow their notes.

### Be Up Front

When you come to class, look and act like a student. Be ready to start on time. (If you come in late, enter quietly without disrupting the class.)

Always sit in the front of the class, not in the back. Research shows that students who sit up front get better grades than students who sit in the back.

Teachers often feel that students who sit in the back aren't as interested in the course. You will also find that it is easier to get involved in the class and pay attention when you are sitting in front.

Avoid guilt by association. Sit with friends only if they are good students who are quiet and attentive in class.

### **Join In**

Keep your notebook, textbooks, and pen out in front of you. Keep your eyes on the teacher, look like you are paying attention. Participate in class discussion and ask questions if you don't understand a point. When a student's grade falls on the borderline between two grades, the teacher often decides on the basis of the student's attendance and classroom participation.

Some students say they don't talk in class because they don't want to speak in front of a group. But, as one study skills expert has said, Shyness pays no dividends and most teachers expect you to participate whether you are shy or not" (Greene, 1971,7).

When class is ending, do not begin putting your notebook away while the teacher is still talking.

### **Make a Good First Impression**

And remember, first impressions tend to last. If you begin the semester by missing class, doing poorly on quizzes, and turning in late work, that impression is liable to stay with the instructor no matter what you do later to make it up. So get off to a good start and the teacher will assume that you intend to do well in the course.

### **Getting Help From Your Instructors**

One difference between high school and college that bothers many students is that in college you are often more anonymous and unknown to your teacher. Feeling like they are "just a number" makes some students shy away from getting to know their teachers or speaking to them about their problems in a course.

Actually, instructors can give you much valuable advice about their courses and getting to know your teachers, particularly in small discussion classes, can be very helpful.

If the instructor is familiar with you as a person, he or she will be more likely to help you when you need it because teachers usually respond better to students when they know them as individuals. And you will find that most teachers will be more concerned about the grade they give you if you have sought their help and shown them that you have been trying to improve.

So try to make some personal contact with your teachers early in the course, perhaps by asking questions before or after class.

### **Get Help Early**

To get the instructor's help, it's very important to see him or her early in the semester when you're first having

problems. This will show that you have been trying your best in the course all along.

Teachers do not like to bail you out at the last minute. So don't ask for help the day before a paper is due or an exam is coming up. Ask for help well in advance to show the teacher that you have been sincerely working on the assignment.

And when you meet with the teacher, show up prepared. Teachers do not like to do your work for you. Be sure you've read the material or have tried to do the problems you will be discussing and have specific questions ready. If you are discussing a paper, have an outline ready.

### **Find Out What Went Wrong**

If you do poorly on your first paper or exam, don't put off seeing the teacher. Ask if you can talk about what you did wrong and how you can do better next time. (Do not, however, seek the teacher's help if you did poorly on the exam simply because you didn't do the reading or didn't come to class.)

When you meet with the instructor, be careful not to criticize or to question his or her judgment. Ask for suggestions on how you can do better on your next assignment.

Be sure to follow any suggestions the instructor makes. For example, if he or she suggests that you go to the Writing Lab or bring in an outline of your next paper, do so.

Overall, you need to show your instructor that you are trying. Instructors, like most people, respond more favorably to people who seem to be trying, even if they don't always succeed.

### **Taking Notes**

If, when it comes time to study for a test, you find your notes are disorganized, unreadable, and have big gaps in them, you've probably lost your best weapon for preparing for the exam - a good set of notes in which you have written down the key points made in each class period.

Studies have shown that several days after hearing a lecture, most students can only recall about 10 percent of what was said. Yet many students give up on note-taking because they are bored or feel it is impossible to get down everything the instructor says.

Following a few simple note-taking guidelines can help you avoid these problems and make the time you spend in class more productive.

### **Take Your Own Notes**

First, don't rely on purchased lecture notes or on notes borrowed from a friend. Experts have found that the process of taking your own notes helps you learn the material. As you write down the key ideas, you begin to sort them out and memorize them. That's why your own notes are much more valuable to you.

### **Be Organized and Neat**

Organize your notes. Keep a separate notebook or separate section of a notebook for each class. If you take notes on odd scraps of paper here and there, you won't have things in order when it's time to study.

To keep track of days when you missed a class, date your notes and draw a line across the bottom of the page to show where each class ends.

It's best to write your notes in ink because pencil smears and can be hard to read. Don't crowd your notes on the page. Leaving blank spaces between the lines will allow you room to add additional points and make your notes easier to read.

It's also a good idea to leave an extra wide (2") left hand margin. You can use this space to summarize your ideas and write key phrases when you are reviewing your notes or studying for exams.

### **Listen and Learn**

The key to taking notes is listening. In fact, good note-taking encourages listening because in order to take notes you must pay attention.

You need to listen and interpret what the lecturer is saying so you can sort out the important points. To do this, you must be an active listener, not merely a tape recorder taking down every word. If you try to mechanically copy down everything the teacher says, you'll be too busy to really listen. Putting what is said into your own words will help you remember the material.

Force yourself to listen. Try to avoid daydreaming or getting distracted and keep your mind on the lecture even if the material is uninteresting. Since you've made the effort to come to class and you have to be there anyway, you might as well pay attention and get the most out of being there.

You may feel that the teacher is boring, talks too fast, or is disorganized, but don't let your dislike for the teacher or the material interfere with your success in the course. One way to practice concentration is to make a check mark on your notes every time you catch yourself letting your mind wander off. You may have twenty or more check marks at first but after a week or two you should be able to reduce the number to two or three (Apps, 1978).

Be sure to listen for key points that the instructor seems to be emphasizing. At the beginning of class, many teachers will outline what will be discussed and give clues as to what is most important.

Involve yourself in the material. During pauses in the lecture ask yourself questions: Why did the teacher say that? What support is there for that statement? How is point one related to point two?

### **The Outline Method**

The outline method is probably the note-taking method most used by students. In this method you write down a main idea (heading) and its subpoints (statements).

You don't need to make a formal outline with roman numerals and capital letters. Just list subtopics and examples under your main points, indicating them with a dash placed in front of each. This way you are picking out the main ideas in the lecture, organizing them, and putting them into your own words all at the same time.

Be sure to write down as many examples or details as you can. These "specifics" will help you remember and understand key concepts when it comes time to study for exams. Try to write in complete phrases or statements.

Also, remember to write down in your notes all the teacher's comments about paper assignments or what will be covered on exams. Don't trust your memory. It's easy to get confused when you are taking four or five different classes.

### **Keep Moving**

When you are taking notes, don't get bogged down worrying about spelling or writing skills, just write down the words the best you. Underline key words that you don't know how to spell so you can look them up later.

Use abbreviations to help you get down more. For example, you might use *fg* for federal government or *e* for economics. But be sure to keep track of what your abbreviations stand for.

When you miss an idea, leave a blank space to fill it in later, using notes borrowed from a classmate.

Although it's a good idea to look over your notes as soon as possible after class, don't waste time recopying or typing them. It's better to use this time reviewing and completing the notes you have taken. Studies have shown that students get better recall from their original notes than from retyped notes. This is because a doodle or a coffee stain sometimes triggers a memory (Greene, 1971.)

### **Use What You've Got**

When it comes time to study for an exam, really use your notes. Go through them and underline or highlight the main ideas. Then go through them repeatedly, reciting the main ideas to yourself.

### **Always Take Notes**

It's a good idea to always take notes in all your classes. Many students feel that there is no need to take notes in small discussion classes such as Rhetoric, Intro to Lit., or Problems in Human History because other students rather than the teacher do most of the talking. Although taking notes in these classes is different than in lecture classes, it is just as important because most teachers rely heavily on what was said in class discussion when they make up their exams.

Take down key points made in discussion and listen for times when the instructor steps in and clarifies the major points or interrupts discussion to give a brief lecture. Even though the class may not be a lecture class, you will still cover a lot of material and you can't rely solely on your memory to retain it.

If you are having problems taking notes in a class, go over your notes with a tutor or the instructor to see how you can improve.

### **Becoming an Active Reader**

One of the most surprising things about college for many students is the amount of reading most courses require. Some students do more reading their first semester in college than they had to do all through high school.

To cope with all this new material, most freshmen have to learn a new way to read. Otherwise they may find that they are reading too slowly, can't identify the most important points, or are skimming through their assignments in last-minute panic.

Some students believe that "speed reading" is the answer. But in most cases, there is no real way to speed over the material. The real problem is learning how to remember or retain what you read.

### **Concentrate**

The first thing you need to do is concentrate. Students who can't concentrate waste hours staring blankly at pages without really knowing what they are reading. To combat the concentration problem, you need to attack the material in an active way.

The trick is to have a purpose and some questions in mind when you read. If you read to look for the answers to questions instead of merely running your eyes mechanically over the pages, you are more likely to become involved in your reading and focus in on the key points that you need to remember.

### **Make a Sneak Preview**

The basic technique for active reading is to skim over a chapter before beginning it to "preview" the main ideas you will be reading about. To preview the material, look over the chapter subheadings and other main ideas and read the chapter summary.

Then think about the ideas that the chapter will be covering before you begin reading. This will give you something to look for as you read and you will remember the material better because you have already "covered" it once.

### **Underline**

As you read, underline or highlight key words and phrases (unless you are reading a library book). You can also draw stars or vertical lines in the margins to emphasize points.

Underlining helps you remember the material and makes the important ideas stand out when you read or scan the chapter when studying for a test. It can turn your book into a valuable notebook.

Yet many students have a problem with underlining. Because they are not sure what is important, they find themselves underlining every sentence. Skimming and previewing the entire chapter before reading will help you get a better idea of what the important ideas are.

Don't get discouraged. Keep it up and eventually you will become more skilled at picking out what needs underlining.

You can also make notes in the margins of your book and write a summary of what you've read on an empty page at the end of a chapter or in the front or back of the book. Your personal notes will help make the material meaningful for you.

### **Make the Material Relevant to You**

As you read, try to relate what you are reading to your own experience or to what the instructor has said in class. This will help you remember it.

### **Writing Papers**

Students often aren't sure what teachers are looking for in papers or what makes the difference between a good and bad paper. That's why it is important to listen carefully and take notes when teachers explain paper assignments in class.

### **How Teachers Judge Papers**

In general, however, when a teacher evaluates a paper he or she is likely to ask (1) Does the paper cover the assigned topic? (2) Did the student put real thought and effort into this paper or does it seem to be just thrown together at the last minute? (3) Has the student just written the paper off the top of his or her head or has he or she bothered to back up ideas presented by referring specifically to the material covered? (4) Has the student put in the time and effort to write smooth, clear sentences and to organize his or her ideas so that I don't have to read the paper two or three times to make sense of it? (5) Has

the student shown that he or she cares about the finished product by typing the paper neatly and proofreading it to fix typographical errors?

### **Getting Started**

Some students feel that they are the only ones who find writing papers difficult and thus avoid getting started. The fact is that just about everyone finds it hard to make themselves sit down and write. Writing is difficult and demanding and there really is no "easy way out" or shortcut to writing a good paper.

Getting an early start and allowing yourself the time you need is your best bet. Papers written at the last minute usually show it. They lack the kind of depth and polish college instructors expect. You can do a lot more with your ideas if you get started earlier.

### **Choosing a Topic**

First, be sure you understand the assignment. Take notes when the teacher explains what he or she wants in the paper: How important is length? Should you use outside sources and footnotes? Make certain you understand clearly what is expected before you begin.

If the teacher gives you a list of possible topics to choose from, try to choose a topic you find interesting. Putting your topic in the form of a question will often help generate ideas on the subject and help you figure out where to begin.

### **Gather Materials and Resources and Do the Necessary Reading**

Give yourself time to carefully read the material you are writing the paper on. If you start writing before you are familiar with your topic, you'll be very unsure about what you are saying.

If you will need library books as resources, check them out early or you may find that they have already been checked out when you need them.

### **Make an Outline**

Organizing your paper allows your reader to grasp your ideas quickly and to follow your line of thought easily.

Your paper should be organized around a central thesis or idea and each point you make should be related to this main idea. This will keep you from jumping from one idea to the next without making connections between them. You can relate to points you make to your main idea so that a whole picture emerges.

Write the main idea of your paper in one sentence at the top of your outline. Using your main idea as your guide, outline or list the main points you plan to cover in the paper.

### **"Tell Them, Show Them, Tell Them"**

A paper may be viewed as having three parts: an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

One old formula to follow in organizing your paper is (1) "Tell them what you are going to tell them" (Introduction); (2) "Tell them" (body); and (3) "Tell them what you've told them" (conclusion).

The introduction, your first paragraph, should state your main idea and give a brief summary of the key points you plan to bring up so that the reader knows what you intend to provide or do in the paper.

By giving the reader a "road map," the introduction "sets up" the entire paper and helps the reader focus on what you are saying. Your conclusion should repeat your main idea and sum up your main points for the reader.

### **Write Your Rough Draft**

Following the points in your outline, write your rough draft. Remember to develop your ideas. Teachers' main complaint about students' papers is that they are too general and not specific enough in developing their points.

Even though it is quicker and easier to just write down a lot of opinions and generalizations off the top of your head, you need to take the time to look up examples and illustrations to prove your point.

Don't leave the reader with "unmade connections" or with questions about what you really mean. Say enough to get your point across and to prove it. You must pin yourself down and make the effort to be specific if you want your paper to say anything valuable or interesting.

### **Editing Your Rough Draft**

Now that you have your basic ideas down, don't rush straight to the typewriter. Instead read your first draft over to see where it can be improved.

You can improve your paper tremendously by taking the time to edit and revise it carefully. Use a red pencil to mark paragraphs that need rearranging, sentences that need rewriting, or parts where you need to elaborate more.

Be sure that your paper is written clearly. The reader should not have to work to figure out what you mean. To check the clarity of your sentences, read your rough draft aloud slowly. Mark any sentence that doesn't sound right to you or seems tangled, awkward, or incomplete and circle any words that might be misspelled.

Then make yourself take the time to go back over the sentences and rewrite them and look up the circled words.

### **Face Facts: "Little Things" Do Count**

Some students complain when teachers take points off for unclear writing or for spelling. They argue that papers should be judged on the basis of "what they say" not "how they say it."

But the fact is that you can't really separate what you say from how you say it. If your ideas are not expressed clearly, they will not come across to the reader. The reader should not have to wade through confusing, twisted sentences to figure out what you really mean.

And although spelling and proofreading errors may seem minor to you, to the teacher they are big mistakes that indicate a carelessness that is unacceptable in a college-level paper.

### **Type Your Final Draft**

Be sure your first draft is completely written and checked before you start typing. Sentences written at the last minute at the typewriter usually do not improve a paper. In fact, if you have time, is a good idea to type a draft of your paper before you type the final version. It is easier to edit and improve a typed draft. And since this draft is for your own use, you can type quickly without worrying about typing errors.

### **Neatness Counts**

Unless the teacher specifies otherwise, double space your paper using standard margins. Neatness counts. Studies have shown that instructors give neatly typed papers a grade higher than messy or handwritten papers that say the same thing.

Proofread your paper after it is typed and make neat corrections in black ink or pencil. Students often skip this important last step, giving the teacher the impression they didn't care enough about the paper to check it over.

If you are not good at catching spelling or typing mistakes, have a friend or tutor check your paper after you do. Don't let these easily preventable mistakes undermine an otherwise successful paper.

### **Lateness Hurts**

Turn your papers in on time. Most teachers grade late papers lower even if they don't explicitly say so or have set rules about taking points off for late work.

When your paper is returned, study the teacher's comments carefully so you can improve on your next paper for the class and for other classes.

It's a good idea to save your papers and look over the teacher's comments again before you begin work on your next paper for the class. This will help you remember what you need to improve on.

## **Studying for Exams**

In general, whether you are studying for an exam or not, the key is to be an **active** student. You should never study by just running your eyes over the textbook or glancing over your notes. Reading material over and over again is also an inefficient way to learn it.

If you want to really learn and remember the material, you must take a more active approach. You need to do something to help you become involved with what you are studying. In fact, experts suggest that you should always study as though you were studying for an exam.

To improve your concentration, design specific tasks in which you actively "play" with the course material. You might make a list of study questions, outline the material, work the problems in the book, think of practical applications of the ideas, or ask yourself questions out loud and rephrase the material in your own words.

If you put information into your own words and "play" with it in other ways, you will remember it better. With outlines, lecture notes, textbooks, and notes on outside reading in front of you, prepare an outline of main topics in the course. There will usually be not more than 10 to 12 main divisions.

The outline will help bind together the details of the course so that you will recall them more readily and be more likely to use them in their proper contexts. go back over all course materials and select facts and details such as laws, principles, theories, formulas, illustrations, events, and definitions and highlight them.

Sift out the less important material and actively decide to retain the important points. Recite and repeat. Few people can retain or remember information seen only once. Learning often involves going over material several times.

Putting technical terms and names of theories and key concepts on flashcards is one way to review.

Asking yourself questions about the material and reciting the answers to yourself is also helpful because reciting information aloud helps you remember it.

### **Anticipate Questions**

As you are studying, try to anticipate the questions that may be asked on the test. Then do some self testing. Answer your questions verbally to yourself or write out sample answers.

Get together with one or more students who are doing well in the course. Organize a series of questions that may be on the test and quiz each other. This will reinforce and review the material you've learned and will point out areas where you need to study more.

Go back over and review quizzes, tests, or papers that have been returned to you during the term.

### **Divide and Conquer**

If you feel overwhelmed by the amount of studying ahead, it may be helpful to break down the work into smaller pieces based on the general outline of the course. List these smaller units in order of priority, given the amount of time that remains.

### **Review Works Best The Second Time Around**

And remember, these techniques for studying for exams work best when you are reviewing material that you've already covered once. Frequent short reviews help you retain the material better than cramming. Studies indicate that cramming works best when the material has already been studied over a period of days or weeks.

### **Test Taking**

#### **Getting Ready**

Be "exam-wise." Find out what kind of test the teacher plans to give. Write down in your notes all comments he or she makes about what will be on the test and how to study for it.

Find out exactly what material will be covered. Get an idea of the type of questions the instructor asks - essay, true-false, or multiple choice - and find out how much of the exam will be based on class lectures and how much on textbook reading.

If possible, look at previous exams from the class and talk to students who have an idea of the type of questions asked and how difficult they are.

Look over your previous tests in the class to determine where and why you lost credit.

Anticipate questions. As you review your notes and textbooks, try to predict the questions the instructor will ask and then work on answering them.

Plan your studying time so you get enough sleep before the exam.

#### **Taking The Exam**

Be sure to be on time for the exam so that you don't miss any special instructions. Listen for these instructions when the teacher is handing out the test. He or she may tell you how many points questions are worth or that you may choose between two questions. Some students do poorly on exams simply because they don't follow instructions carefully.

Before beginning, look over the entire test quickly. If you don't do this, you may spend too much time struggling over one section when you know the answers to another. But don't spend too much time previewing the test. Just

get a basic idea of how it is set up so you can plan how you want to divide up your time.

Next, plan your time, allowing the most time for the questions worth the most points. Don't panic if the test looks too hard or too long. Answer the questions you know best first, being careful to spend the most time on the questions that are worth the most points. Later questions may remind you of the answers to some of the earlier ones.

Read the instructions for each part of the test carefully and read every word in these questions so that you are sure you know what the instructor is really asking.

#### **Stick Around**

Use all the time available to you. Don't panic and tense up because others seem to be finishing faster than you. It's not a good idea to leave early even if most other students are leaving. You can use this time to check your answers and to fill in extra points and ideas on essay questions.

Taking this extra time often can mean getting a letter grade higher on the test. If you leave early, you may also give the instructor the impression that you don't care about doing your best.

#### **Surviving Essay Exams**

New students often feel overwhelmed by essay tests and end up writing sketchy, panicky answers even when they know the material. The main points to remember when taking an essay exam are to truly answer the questions the teacher asks, be well organized, and write legibly. Study the questions to determine just what the instructor wants and then answer them. Don't waste time bluffing with irrelevant information. Just writing down everything you know about the subject whether it answers the question or not will not help.

And avoid padding with excess words just to fill up space. Teachers can spot padding easily and will feel you are wasting their time.

#### **Preview the Test**

Look over the entire test first to see how long it is and to determine which questions are worth the most points and how you should budget your time.

Plan your time carefully. Don't get carried away writing on one question and neglect the others. Each question is worth only so many points. Don't write a long answer to a short 5-point question and neglect a 20-point question.

If you are given a choice of questions, make your choice carefully but quickly and stick to it. If you shift from one choice to the other, you will lose too much time.

#### **Double Check the Question**

Make sure you understand the question. Students often find out too late that their answer does not really answer the question. Before answering a question, read it twice and underline key terms that will help you focus on the main point of the question. If it says "describe," "list," or "compare," do exactly what is asked for. If you misread the question, your entire answer will be off the point.

### **Jot Down Some Ideas**

Take the time to think out and organize your answer before writing. Quickly jot down in the margins or on a scratch sheet a list of reminders of the points you intend to bring up. It will not take much time to do this. You will feel more organized when you begin to write, and you won't leave out any of your ideas.

If new ideas occur to you as you are writing, jot them down on this list immediately so you don't forget them when it comes time to use them.

### **Be Specific**

Begin with a strong introductory thesis statement that summarizes your main position on the question. You can then proceed to back up this statement with proof. Many teachers say that students are too vague and fail to support broad generalizations in their exam answers. Use details and examples to support your ideas and be specific whenever you can be. Use appropriate technical terms from the course whenever possible and try to spell these correctly. Taking the time to be specific will add depth to your answer and show you really know the material.

Also, remember to keep your instructor's point of view in mind when answering the questions.

Conclude with a summary statement that summarizes the main points you have been developing.

When you are finished writing your answer, quickly go back and look at the question again to be sure you've really answered every aspect of it.

Leave space after each question to add more information that may come to you later.

If you're running out of time and can't write out the entire answer to the last question you are working on, jot down an outline or a list of major points. You may get some credit.

### **Write Neatly**

Be sure to write legibly. Use ink because pencil can be hard to read. (If you do use pencil, be sure you are not writing too lightly.) Experiments show that, on the average, teachers give illegible papers that say the same thing as legible papers a grade lower. Most instructors resent having to take the time to decipher bad

handwriting, and they can't give you credit for answers they can't read.

### **A Final Look**

When you are finished, look over the exam with a critical eye, pretending you are the instructor or grader. Have you made any glaring or careless mistakes? Did you leave out anything? Is there anything you can add? Sometimes just going back and adding a sentence or two to a question can make a big difference in your grade on the test.

### **Making Multiple Choice Tests**

Many freshmen are unpleasantly surprised by their first college multiple choice exam.

Because college tests are usually carefully designed and very detailed, students find that it is harder to "outsmart" them or guess their way through them than it may have been in high school.

So don't assume that because a test is multiple choice you don't need to know the material well. Most college tests are carefully designed to weed out students who rely on guessing.

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### **Tips for Guessing on Multiple Choice Exams**

- Eliminate and cross out all the alternatives you can, then make your best guess.
  - Alternatives with words like all, every, and never tend to be wrong.
  - Statistically, more right alternatives are put in the B or C slot.
  - Longer alternatives tend to be right.
  - Vague alternatives tend to be wrong.
  - Watch out for alternatives that are true but have nothing to do with the question.
  - If the alternative does not fit well grammatically with the question, it is probably wrong.
  - If two or more alternatives say the same thing, they are probably both wrong. (You can have two wrong answers but not two right answers on a multiple choice test.)
  - When three or more alternatives deal in different ways with one concept, one of them is usually right. (The teacher usually won't waste three alternatives on a "wrong" concept.)
  - If two alternatives seem to be opposites, one of them is probably correct.
  - Alternatives with a technical term you've never seen before tend to be incorrect. (Assuming, of course, that you've studied the material.)
  - The answer to one question is sometimes given away in another question. (Tests contain a lot of information which you can use.)
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**None of these rules applies all the time, so use them only if you have to.**

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Before you begin, find out whether the test is set up so that you lose points by guessing. If it is, you should avoid wild guesses.

Begin by looking over the entire exam to see how long it is and get an idea of which items count the most and how you should budget your time.

### **Do The Easy Ones First**

Go through the exam answering the questions you are positive about first and putting an "X" next to the ones you don't know. Once you've answered the easy ones, go back to the harder ones and work on those.

The important thing is to consider each question carefully but to keep moving. Don't get bogged down with one or two questions.

When you are finished, if you have time, go back over the questions you marked with an "X" the first time through because you weren't sure of your answer. But never change an answer unless you are really sure your new answer is correct. Experiments have shown that your first choice is more likely to be right.

## **Other Kinds of Exams**

### **True-False Tests**

Be careful not to waste too much time making up your mind about true-false questions. Consider each question carefully, answering those you can and putting a check mark next to more difficult ones to come back to later.

If there is no penalty for guessing, guess. In general, words like only, never, and always are clues that the statement is probably false, while words like usually, most, and some tend to appear in true statements.

As with multiple choice questions, it is usually best not to go back and change your answers when you are finished. Your first answer is more likely to be correct.

### **Problem Solving Exams**

Problem solving exams are usually given in courses such as math, computer science, and accounting. The best way to study for these tests is to work practice problems.

When taking these exams, it is usually important that you show how you solved the problem. To do this you need to present all your work in an organized, clear fashion. You should also label your final answer so the instructor can find it easily.

### **Open-Book Exams**

In an open-book test, you are allowed to bring your books and notes to class with you to use during the exam. But this doesn't mean that you don't have to study for the test.

Open-book exams are usually constructed in such a way that you will have little time to spend looking through your books because you will be busy writing your answers. The answers will involve interpreting and analyzing material in the books, not merely repeating what is in them.

So study as you would for an essay test. You must be familiar with your books and notes so that you can find the information you need quickly.

### **Take-Home Exams**

A take-home exam is a test that the instructor gives you to take home and do, usually within two or three days' time. Because you have more time and can take the exam home, your answers are expected to be more elaborate and detailed than on an in-class essay exam.

In this sense doing a take-home exam is more like writing a paper. You need to write a clear, well-organized, in-depth answer to each of the questions.

Be sure to take the time to refer back to class books and notes to find specific points and examples to use in your answers.

Unless the instructor specifies otherwise, take-home exams should be typed.

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