

How To...

Successful Study Techniques

Introduction

Many students hate to admit it, but tests and exams are a big part of school life. That's why using successful study techniques is key to surviving and doing well in high school and college.

The problem is that many students do not know what these techniques are. Some resort to cheating and cramming -- sneaky ways of getting good grades with potentially devastating consequences.

Yet there is hope for those who are clueless about studying and even those who are looking for better grades. Almost all schools have guidance counselors and learning centers students can visit to get advice on preparing for any exam.

Websites and books also offer great advice, like using rhymes to memorize chemistry formulas. Whether the tips come from advisors, online articles or old-fashioned books, they all promote one message: successful studying is about being organized and motivated.

In this article, we will look at what experts agree are some basic steps to successful studying. The first two steps are all about good planning -- finding out what type of information will be asked on the exam and setting aside time to learn that information.

The final steps are about getting down to the dirty work -- actually studying and getting excited about it. Following these steps will make preparing for tests less stressful.

By the time you have finished reading this article, you should be able to:

- Define and apply the four rules for successful studying
- Describe the best study environment
- Explain how to study actively
- Discuss the importance of using proper study techniques
- Use the included resources to get additional information on successful study techniques

How To ...

Here is how to prepare for any test or exam to get results you can be proud of:

- [Know What You Have to Study](#)
- [Manage Your Time](#)
- [Select the Best Study Environment](#)
- [Study Actively, Not Passively](#)

Know What You Have to Study

This first step is easy and does not take much work. Before any exam, list what it is you have to know. This way, when it comes down to crunch time, you can concentrate on what is important and not waste time memorizing useless facts.

"The student has to begin by listening in class and jotting down what it is that has to be done," says Judy Macdonald. She counsels students at a learning center.

That means actually attending your classes regularly. Teachers usually base their tests on their lectures. So if you skip class, you will probably miss the answers to the test.

"I think a lot of kids sleep in class or spend their time talking and being distracted. They could save so much time by participating in class discussions or critically listening," explains Macdonald.

If you have attended all your classes but are still unsure about what you have to know, ask your teacher to specify which chapters, concepts or formulas you will be quizzed on.

Manage Your Time

Once you know what it is that has to be done, you then have to find the time to do it properly, says Macdonald. Don't wait until the night before the exam to crack open your book and read your notes.

"Cramming doesn't allow you to learn new information. It will only work to review material you have already studied before," says Joshua Halberstam. He is a university professor and author of a book on studying.

According to the University of Waterloo's Study Skills Package, the ability to concentrate depends on sleep, healthy eating and regular exercise. Your grades will be higher the more you get of each. Halberstam says that by cramming, you miss out on a good night's sleep, making it harder for you to think the next day.

"There is evidence that your IQ won't go down, but your reflexes do go down and you won't be as sharp," he says. Consequently, even if you have the information stored in your brain, it will be harder to get it out.

You can avoid these problems if you make a plan to study in advance. Start by reviewing your class notes and readings every day. Research shows that if you don't practice what you've learned within a day, you can forget almost half of it within 24 hours.

As the exam nears, Macdonald suggests creating a more detailed study plan. She tells students to block off study periods in their agendas or on their calendars two weeks before the test. You can organize your time by hour, by day or by task – whatever works best for you.

For instance, you can set aside Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. to study. Another option is to block off Monday, Wednesday and Friday nights to learn five new physics problems no matter how long it takes you. It's all about dividing large study assignments into smaller, more manageable tasks, says Dave Berry, an independent college advisor.

"For example, if you have to learn 50 new vocabulary or spelling words, learn five groups of 10 spaced out over the time available rather than trying to learn all 50 at one sitting," he says.

The important thing is that you have a schedule, so you will not be overwhelmed trying to learn everything the day before the test. Macdonald says you will also feel freer with a plan.

"You can go off and enjoy yourself without worrying because things are under control."

Select the Best Study Environment

"After you find the time, you actually have to sit down and follow your plan," says Macdonald.

But where do you sit?

"The desk is the place to be," says Macdonald. She says you are more alert and motivated when sitting up than when lying on a comfortable bed.

She also suggests eliminating distractions – like television, music and telephone calls – that can break your concentration.

"When you're going to study, study. When you want to listen to music and hang out, hang out. Don't mix the two," warns Halberstam. "Students have a terrible habit of fooling themselves that they're actually studying while listening to hip hop."

Yet Macdonald admits some students need music. "A lot of kids, unfortunately, live in really noisy homes. They use music to block out sisters and brothers," she says. "I tell those students to go out to a library."

Study Actively, Not Passively

Whether you are at the library or in your room at a desk, learning does not happen by osmosis. You will not absorb much information by sitting back and staring blankly at your textbook for hours.

The trick is to study actively. Become involved with what you are studying. One way is to reduce your textbook to notes.

"I tell people to not just underline the books. Make summaries in your own words. It's easier to remember your own words," says Macdonald.

You can also draw diagrams or create mental images to help you understand complex concepts.

Berry gives an example of how to do this. "If you're trying to wrap your mind around what happens in a nuclear chain reaction, imagine a basketball court covered wall-to-wall with cocked mousetraps. Imagine a ping-pong ball resting on top of each mousetrap. Now, imagine tossing a ping-pong ball into the middle of that. What happens next is a chain reaction."

Mnemonic devices are other memory enhancing tricks you can use. A mnemonic device can be a word, phrase or even a rhyme. For instance, you can use the word HOMES to remember the Great Lakes: Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior.

Another example is the sentence "every good boy does fine," in which the first letter of each word stands for a note on the musical scale.

Repeating things aloud or to a friend also improves memory. So forming study groups to quiz one another is another good idea. Halberstam suggests making practice tests together.

"If you are having a multiple-choice test, the best thing you can do to study is make your own multiple-

choice test," says Halberstam.

If you can't find a few friends, repeat what you have learned to a parent, cousin or anyone who will listen.

Active studying means your body has to be active, too. The average attention span for one task is approximately 20 minutes, according to the Sam Houston State University Counseling Center website. Go for a walk or have a snack whenever you feel your head is too full, says Macdonald.

Halberstam agrees. "Pick a chunk-sized material to study, then reward yourself after studying each one."

The greatest reward comes after the test. When combined with the three other components of successful studying, active studying makes getting high test scores a reality. Of course, better grades mean higher self-esteem.

"Your whole experience with school will change as a result," says Macdonald.

Resources

Links

How to Study

You'll find hundreds of tips here. You can even submit your own.

- <http://www.how-to-study.com/>

Sleep Deprivation and the College Student

The effects of not getting enough sleep on learning

- <http://sleepdisorders.about.com/cs/sleepdeprivation/a/college.htm>