

Study Skills Primer

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If you asked a cross section of students why they are in college, you would probably get a wide range of responses. People go to college to enrich themselves, to prepare for a specific career, to please their educate and friends or family, and for a number of other reasons. Whatever the reasons, just about everyone hopes college will be a positive, worthwhile experience.

Many students, however, face obstacles to making the most of their time in college. Such students come to feel that they *can't* do the work required. But often their real problem is they *don't know how* to do the work. Making use of the following studying tips and advice will help you to take the fullest possible advantage of all that college has to offer.

Having the Right Attitude

Your attitude must say, "I will do the work." As the semester unfolds, you must attend classes and complete assignments. When you hit crunch times, you must do the plain, hard work that college demands. Some people take on the work and persist even when they hit snags and problems; others don't take on the work or don't persist when things get rough. This inner commitment to getting the work done is probably the single most important factor needed for success in college.

Doing the Work Despite Difficulties

Some people joke that college orientation—the day or so before the start of the first semester—lasts a year or more for many students. The joke is all too often true. You may find that the first year of college is a time of unsettling change and adjustment. You may start questioning long-accepted personal values. You might begin thinking about career goals. You are in a new environment and must learn to form new relationships. If you have been away from school for several years, or were never a serious student in high school, you may have to spend a good deal of time developing effective study habits. In addition, you may find that existing financial, personal, or family problems create even more stress during this already anxious period in your life.

Invariably, the students who succeed, in spite of their difficulties, have determined to do the work. You too, despite the worries and demands you may experience during a semester, must resolve to get the work done. Otherwise you will lose valuable opportunities that may not come your way again.

Rather than trying to do the work, you may decide to drop a course or drop out of college for a semester. Your decision may be exactly the right thing to do, but before taking such an important step, be sure to talk to someone about your plans. At school you will find people to talk to—counselors, advisers, teachers, and others—who can help you get a perspective on your situation. From time to time, all of us need the insights into ourselves that we cannot possibly get alone, but that others can offer us.

Are You Avoiding the Work?

As the semester progresses and the work pressure builds, you must make a choice. You have two alternatives. One is to do the work: to leave the game table, click off the stereo or television, turn down the invitation to go out, and go off alone to get your work done. The other alternative is to avoid the work, and, as we all know, there are countless ways to do this.

Some of the tactics students use to avoid studying are described below. If you find yourself using these excuses or falling into these traps repeatedly, you should do some serious thinking about whether now is the right time for you to be in college. If you are unsure of your commitment, don't coast along, trying to ignore the situation. Instead, make an appointment with a counselor, your

academic adviser, or some other interested person. That way you will confront your problem and begin to deal with it.

"I Can't Do It"

Many students adopt a defeatist attitude from the very start. Convinced they cannot do the work, they don't even try. However, the only way you can find out whether or not you can do something is by trying—giving it your best shot. Most colleges will give determined students plenty of help by making available such services as tutoring programs and reading, writing, and math labs.

"I'm Too Busy"

Some students make themselves too busy, taking on a job that is not absolutely necessary or working more hours on a job than they need to. Others get involved in social activities on and off campus. Still others make personal or family problems so tangled and pressing that they cannot concentrate on their work. There are real cases in which people become so busy or troubled that they cannot do their work. But there are many cases in which students unconsciously create conflicts to have an excuse for not doing what they know they should.

"I'll Do It Later"

Everyone tends at times to procrastinate—to put things off. Some students, however, constantly postpone doing assignments and setting aside regular study hours. Time and time again they put off what needs to be done so they can watch TV, talk to a friend, go to the movies, or do any one of a hundred other things.

Beware of convincing yourself that you work best under pressure. Although it may seem that you have your most interesting ideas the night before a paper is due, or know best the material you study between midnight and two for a nine a.m. exam, you will almost certainly benefit from advance preparation. One of the truisms of psychological literature is that we learn things better, and are able to recall them longer, when we study material in small chunks over several study sessions, rather than massing our study into one lengthy period. This implies that all-night studying just before a test is going to be less effective—and a lot more tiring—than employing a series of steady, regular study sessions.

"I'm Bored with the Subject"

Students sometimes suggest that they are doing poorly in a course because the instructor or the subject matter is boring. These students want education to be high-pitch entertainment—an unrealistic expectation. On the whole, college courses and instructors balance out: some will be boring, some will be exciting, many will be somewhere in between. If a course is not interesting to you, you should be all the more motivated to do the work so you can leave the course behind once and for all.

"I'm Here and That's What Counts"

Some people spend a good part of college lost in a dangerous fantasy. They feel, "Everything will be fine. I'm here in college. I have a student I.D. card and a backpack full of textbooks. All this proves I am a college student. I've made it." Such students have succumbed to a fantasy we all indulge in at times: the belief that we will get something for nothing. Most everyone learns from experience, however, that such a hope is false. Life seldom gives us something for nothing, and college won't either. To become what you want to be, you must be prepared to make a solid effort. By making such a decision and acting on it, you assume control of your life.

Getting Off to a Strong Start

Making a good schedule is one way to start out well in college. Many schools require that all students have a fixed schedule their first semester. However, if you have some choice about what courses to take, make sure you read your college catalog closely. It may describe the content and objectives of most courses and indicate prerequisites—other courses or experiences you must have before enrolling. If you don't have the stated prerequisites, do not sign up for a course.

Before making up your schedule, it's a good idea to speak to some knowledgeable people who can help you select interesting and appropriate courses. Academic advisers, counselors, or upper-level students can give you sound advice about scheduling.

Try to plan your classes so you don't schedule on any day an uninterrupted series of lectures or labs. Such a routine can be fatiguing and prevent you from doing your best work.

Don't schedule more than the recommended number of courses your first semester. You don't want to end up with a heavy schedule and an impossible workload.

Learning the Ground Rules for Each Course

Another way to make a good start is to learn the ground rules for each of your courses. Many instructors explain course requirements in the first class, so be sure you're there and take notes. Your instructors may also distribute a syllabus or course description. Look at the syllabus carefully. It often tells where the instructor's office is, lists the instructor's office hours, and presents information about attendance, quizzes and exams, required reading, and so on. If such information is not covered in the syllabus or by the instructor, be sure to ask your instructor about these matters.

The first week or so of a new semester is generally hectic. If there are mix-ups in your schedule and you can't make it to the first or second class, let the instructor know that you haven't dropped the course and that you plan to attend class regularly. Also, don't forget to get the course syllabus and check with the instructor—not other students—about any work assigned during the classes you missed.

Keeping Up With Your Courses

If you have problems understanding the material in a course, don't waste time complaining about the subject or the instructor. And don't sit back calmly and assume that everything will work out. Make sure you get help, either from another student or from your instructor. Many students are reluctant to go to their instructors for help, but that is why teachers have office hours. Take advantage of these set-aside times.

Whenever you are absent, you should ask the instructor, not other students, about missed assignments. It's wise not to rely on other students for this information because they may not have understood the assignment or may not explain it to you clearly. Your work will invariably reflect this confusion. By going to your instructor, you will not only get the information firsthand, you will also demonstrate your commitment to your work.

ACTIVITY #1: Evaluate your commitment to serious study. Print the worksheet and keep track of how often you use each of the avoidance tactics listed below.

"I'm too busy."	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
"I'll do it later."	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
"I'm bored with the subject."	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
"I'm here and that's what counts."	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never

Making the Most of Your Time

All of us need free time, hours without demands and obligations, so we can just relax and do what we please. However, it is easy to lose track of time and discover suddenly that there aren't enough hours to do what needs to be done. No skill is more basic to survival in college than time control. If you do not use your time well, your college career—and the life goals that depend on how well you do in college—will slip through your fingers. The following three methods will help you gain control of your time: you will learn how to use a large monthly calendar, a weekly study schedule, and a daily or weekly "To Do" list.

A Large Monthly Calendar

You should buy or make a large monthly calendar. Such a calendar is your first method of time control, because it allows you, in one quick glance, to get a clear picture of what you need to do in the weeks to come. Be sure your monthly calendar has a good-sized block of white space for each date. Then, as soon as you learn about exam dates and paper deadlines, enter them in the appropriate spot on the calendar. Hang the calendar in a place where you will see it every day, perhaps above your desk or on your bedroom wall.

A Weekly Study Schedule

A weekly study schedule will make you aware of how much time you actually have each week, and will help you use that time effectively.

Look over the master weekly schedule (Fig. 1.1) which one student, Rich, prepared to gain control of his time. Then read the points that follow; all are important in planning an effective weekly schedule.

Figure 1.1
Rich's Weekly Schedule

	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
6:00 a.m.	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open
7:00	B	Open	B	Open	B	Open	Open
8:00	Eng	B	Eng	Open	Eng	B	Open
9:00	S	S	S	B	S	Open	B
10:00	Psy	Phy Ed	Psy	S	Psy	Job	Open
11:00	Open	Phy Ed	Open	S	Open	Job	S
12:00	L	L	Open	L	L	Job	S
1:00 p.m.	Bio	Lab	Bio	S	Bio	Job	L
2:00	S	Lab	Open	S	S	Job	Open
3:00	S	Lab	Job	Open	Job	Job	Open
4:00	Open	Open	Job	S	Job	Job	Open
5:00	D	D	Job	D	Job	Job	D
6:00	Open	Open	D	Open	Job	D	Open
7:00	Speech	S	Open	Soc	Job	Open	S
8:00	Speech	S	S	Soc	D	Open	S
9:00	Speech	Open	S	Soc	Open	Open	S
10:00	Open	S	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open
11:00	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open
12:00	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open	Open
Study Hours/Day	3	4	3	5	2	0	5

B=Breakfast
 S=Study
 Psy=Psychology
 Eng=English
 L=Lunch
 Open=free time
 Soc=Sociology
 Phy Ed =Physical Education

D=Dinner
Bio=Biology

Important Points about a Weekly Study Schedule:

- **Plan, at first, at least one hour of study time for each hour of class time.** Depending on the course, the grade you want, and your own study efficiency, you may have to schedule more time later. A difficult course, for example, may require three hours or more of study time for each course hour. Remember that learning is what counts, not the time it takes you to learn. Be prepared to schedule as much time as you need to gain control of a course.
- **Schedule regular study time.** To succeed in your college work, you need to establish definite study hours. If you do not set aside and stick to such hours on a daily or almost daily basis, you are probably going to lose control of your time. There are many values to setting aside regular study hours. First, they help make studying a habit. Study times will be as automatically programmed into your daily schedule as, say, watching a favorite television program. You will not have to remind yourself to study, nor will you waste large amounts of time and energy trying to avoid studying; you will simply do it. Another value of regular study time is that you will be better able to stay up to date on work in your courses. You are not likely to find yourself several days before a test with three textbook chapters to read or five weeks of classroom notes to organize and study. Finally, as mentioned before, regular study takes advantage of the proven fact that a series of study sessions is more effective for learning material than a single long "cram" session.
- **Plan at least one-hour blocks of study time.** If you schedule less than one hour, your study period may be over just when you are fully warmed up and working hard.
- **Reward yourself for using study time effectively.** As the section on operant conditioning in the chapter on learning in your psychology textbook explains, positively reinforcing a certain behavior will likely lead to an increase in the probability of its occurrence. In other words, if after a period of efficient study, you allow yourself to watch an hour of television or to telephone a friend (positive reinforcement), you will be more likely to use your study time effectively in the future. Remember that your reward system won't work if you cheat! If you reward yourself with television and phone conversations with friends after *not* studying, you'll be just as likely to repeat the negative behavior (not using your study time wisely) as the positive behavior (studying effectively).
- **Try to schedule study periods before and after classes.** Ideally, you should read a textbook chapter before a teacher covers it; what you hear in class will then be a "second exposure," and so the ideas are likely to be a good deal more meaningful to you. You should also look over your notes from the preceding class in case the teacher discusses the material further. Similarly, if you take a few minutes to review your notes as soon after class as possible, you will be able to organize and clarify the material while it is still fresh in your mind.
- **Work on your most difficult subjects when you are most alert.** Save routine work for times you are most likely to be tired. You might, for example, study a new and difficult psychology chapter at 8 p.m. if you are naturally alert then, and review vocabulary words for Spanish class at 11 p.m., when you may be a little tired.
- **Balance your activities.** Allow free time for family, friends, sports, television, and so on in your schedule. Note that there is a good deal of free time (empty space) in Rich's schedule (Fig. 1.1), even with his classes, work, and study hours.
- **Keep your schedule flexible.** When unexpected events occur, trade times on your weekly timetable. Do not simply do away with study hours. If you find that your schedule requires constant adjustments, revise it. After two or three revisions, you will have a realistic, practical weekly schedule that you can follow honestly.

A Daily or Weekly "To Do" List

Many successful people make the "to do" list a habit, considering it an essential step in making the most efficient use of their time each day. A "to do" list, made up daily or weekly, may be one of the most important single study habits you will ever acquire. A weekly list should be prepared on a Sunday for the week ahead; a daily list should be prepared the evening before a new day or first thing on the morning of that day.

Carry the list with you throughout the day. Decide priorities. Making the best use of your time means focusing on top-priority items rather than spending hours completing low-priority activities. Place an asterisk (*) or an "A" in front of the high-priority items on the list.

Cross out items as you finish them. Doing this will give you a sense of accomplishment, as well as help you see easily what you still have left to do.

The monthly calendar, master study schedule, and "To Do" list, combined with your own determination to apply them, can reduce the disorder of everyday life. Through time planning, you can achieve the consistency in your work that is vital for success in school. You will probably get more done than you ever have before.

Other Tips

- **If possible, study in a well-lighted place where you can sit comfortably and be quiet and alone.** If your roommates don't keep the same schedule as you and are socializing or relaxing during your optimal study times, plan to go the library or student center. Many dormitories have study lounges as well. If you have one particular spot where you usually do most of your studying, you will almost automatically shift into gear and begin studying when you go to that place.
- **Stay in good physical condition.** You do not want to be prey to quick fatigue or frequent bouts of sickness. Eat nourishing meals; you will probably master a difficult psychology chapter more easily if you have had a solid breakfast than if you had only a cup of coffee. Try to get an average of eight hours of sleep a night unless your system can manage with less. Also, try to exercise on a regular basis. A short workout in the morning will help sustain your energy flow during the day.
- **Use outside study help when needed.** Studying with other people can be beneficial if everyone in the group is committed to doing work and really helping each other to learn the material. Someone else may be able to clarify concepts that you don't quite understand, and the camaraderie may be just what you need to keep you going. Some students, however, use studying in groups to procrastinate further. You may end up wasting hours talking about things that have nothing to do with your studies, or simply complaining about how much you don't want to study. If you become part of a study group, force yourself to ensure that the group stays on track and is helpful to you. Also, find out if your school or individual departments have a tutoring service. If so, do not hesitate to use the service to get help on a particular subject or subjects. Determine if your school, like many, has a learning center where you may work on developing writing, reading, study, and math skills. Finally, learn the office hours of your professors and plan to see them if you need additional help.

ACTIVITY #2: Evaluate your time control skills and study habits. Print out the following schedule and put an x in the appropriate column for each of the following study habits.

Study Habit	Presently Practice	Need to Plan
Use a large monthly calendar.		
Use a weekly study schedule.		
Use a daily or weekly "To Do" list.		
Schedule as many hours as needed for a particular course.		
Have rewards for using study time effectively.		
Work on difficult subjects at times when most alert.		
Balance activities.		
Reschedule study times when regular study hours are interrupted.		
Study in a well-lighted, comfortable, quiet place.		
Stay in good physical condition.		

Use outside study help when needed.		
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ACTIVITY #3: Now try your hand at putting together a weekly study schedule, using Figure 1.2.

Figure 1.2
Your Weekly Schedule

	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.
6:00 a.m.							
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00 p.m.							
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
Study Hours/Day							

Studying Strategies [\(back to top\)](#)

Although you are expected to study and ultimately learn a wide range of material, you are rarely taught any systematic strategies allowing you to study more effectively. However, psychologists have devised several excellent (and proven) techniques for improving study skills, two of which are described below. By employing one of these procedures—known by the initials "SQ3R" and "MURDER"—you can increase your ability to learn and retain information and to think critically, not just in psychology classes but in all academic subjects.

SQ3R

The SQ3R method includes a series of five steps, designated by the initials S-Q-R-R-R. The first step is to *survey* the material by reading the parts of the chapter that give you an overview of the topics covered. Some textbooks contain, for example, chapter outlines, chapter summaries, lists of learning objectives, prologues and epilogues, or some combination of these features and others. The next step—the "Q" in SQ3R—is to *question*. Formulate questions—either aloud or in writing—before actually reading a section of the material. Some textbooks contain critical thinking questions that are a good source of questions. However, do not rely on them entirely. Making up your own questions is crucial. You may want to write them in the margins of your book. This process helps you to focus on the key points of the chapter, while at the same time putting you in an inquisitive frame of mind.

It is now time for the next, and most important, step: to *read* the material. Read carefully and, even more importantly, read actively and critically. For instance, while you are reading, answer the questions you have asked yourself. You may find yourself coming up with new questions as you read along; that's fine, since it shows you are reading inquisitively and paying attention to the material. Critically evaluate material by considering the implications of what you are reading, thinking about possible exceptions and contradictions, and examining the assumptions that lie behind the assertions made by the author.

The next step—the second "R" is the most unusual. This "R" stands for *recite*, meaning that you look up from the book and describe and explain to yourself, or a study partner, the material you have just read and answer the questions you posed earlier. Do it aloud; this is one time when talking to yourself is nothing to be embarrassed about. The recitation process helps you to clearly identify your degree of understanding of the material you have just read. Moreover, psychological research has shown that communicating material to others, or reciting it aloud to yourself, assists you in learning it in a different—and a deeper—way than material that you do not intend to communicate. Hence, your recitation of the material is a crucial link in the studying process.

The final "R" refers to review. As the chapter in your textbook on memory points out, reviewing is a prerequisite to fully learning and remembering material you have studied. Look over the information, reread the features in your textbook that provide you with an overview of the chapter, be sure again that you can answer any critical thinking questions, review questions, and questions you posed for yourself. Reviewing should be an active process, in which you consider how different pieces of information fit together and develop a sense of the overall picture.

MURDER

The MURDER system, although not altogether dissimilar to SQ3R, provides an alternative approach to studying (Dansereau, 1978).

In MURDER, the first step is to establish an appropriate *mood* for studying by setting goals for a study session and choosing a time and place so that you will not be distracted. As mentioned previously, it is best if you schedule regular blocks of study time and select one place that you reserve specifically for studying. Next comes reading for *understanding*, paying careful attention to the meaning of the material being studied. *Recall* is an immediate attempt to recall the material from memory, without referring to the text. *Digesting* the material comes next; you should correct any recall errors, and attempt to organize and store newly learned material in memory.

You should work next on *expanding* (analyzing and evaluating) new material, trying to apply it to situations that go beyond the applications discussed in the text. By incorporating what you have learned into a larger information network in memory, you will be able to recall it more easily in the future. Finally, the last step is to *review*. Just as with the SQ3R system, MURDER suggests that systematic review of material is a necessary condition for successful studying.

Taking Exams

There are some principles of exam performance known only to successful, test-wise students. Millman (1966) defined test-wiseness as the ability to use knowledge of the characteristics of tests and the testing process to improve one's performance. Studies show that test-wise students do better in exams (Rogers & Bateson, 1994; Towns & Robinson, 1993). Here are the basic principles:

- **Know your stuff.** The single most important point is to have a good, solid knowledge and understanding of the material being tested. Using the tips for doing well in college and managing your time, as well as the study strategies described above, can help you to achieve this kind of knowledge and understanding.
- **Schedule your time.** Look the test over and calculate the time you can afford to spend on each item.

- **Read completely.** Be sure to read the entire item. If the item is multiple choice, try to answer it before looking at the alternatives so that you will know which is correct.
- **Eliminate options.** If you don't immediately know the answer, eliminate unlikely options quickly, then choose among the remainder. Your score may well be higher (Kim & Goetz, 1993).
- **Look to other items.** It is common for information in one item to provide an answer or partial answer to another.
- **Don't think too much.** If you don't know an answer, put down your best guess and come back later if time permits. Mark questions you are most uncertain of so that you can return to them later.
- **Don't leave items blank.** Despite rumors to the contrary, it is to your advantage to guess unless the professor will deduct substantial credit for guessing (Budescu & Bar-Hillel, 1993).
- **Ask questions.** Ask the professor or TA to clarify an item if necessary.
- **Review your answers.** Time permitting, go back over the entire test before turning it in. If you are short on time, concentrate on the difficult items you marked.
- **Change your answers!** We emphasize this one because the idea that you should never change an answer is so widespread among students and faculty alike. It is a myth (Schwarz et al., 1991). Studies show that students change answers from right to wrong about 20 percent of the time, but change them from wrong to right 58 percent of the time (Benjamin et al., 1984). Other work shows that 3 points are gained for every 1 lost by changing answers (Geiger, 1991).

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