

10 Steps to Improving Your Study Skills

Improving your study skills can be the great educational equalizer. Effective studying is the one element guaranteed to produce good grades in school. But it is ironic that students are almost never taught how to study - effectively - in school.

Example: An important part of studying is note-taking, yet few students receive any instruction in this skill. At best, you are told simply, "You had better take notes," but not given any advice on what to record or how to use the material as a learning tool.

Fortunately, reliable data on how to study does exist. It has been scientifically demonstrated that one method of note-taking is better than another and that there are routes to more effective reviewing, memorizing and textbook reading as well. The following are 10 proven steps you can take to improve your study habits. I guarantee that if you really use them, your grades will improve.

1. Behaviour modification can work for you.

Use the association learning concept. Attempt, as nearly as possible, to study the same subject at the same time in the same place each day. You will find that, after a very short while, when you get to that time and place, you are automatically in the subject "groove."

Train your brain to think math on a time-place cue, and it will no longer take you 10 minutes a day to get in the math mood. Not only will you save the time and emotional energy you once needed to psych yourself up to do math, or whatever else, it will also help you remember more of what you are studying.

After studying, reinforce yourself by doing something you want to do (watch television, go to a party). Experts know that positive reinforcement of a behaviour (such as studying) will increase its frequency and duration.

2. Do not study more than an hour at a time without taking a break.

In fact, if you are doing straight memorization, do not spend more than 20 to 30 minutes at a time. Here is the rationale behind taking such small bites out of study time.

First, when you are under an imposed time restriction, you use the time more efficiently. Have you noticed how much studying you manage to cram into the day before big exams? That is why it is called "cramming."

Second, psychologists say that you learn best in short takes. In fact, studies have shown that as much is learned in four one- hour sessions distributed over four days as in one marathon six- hour session during one day. That is because, between study times, while you are sleeping or eating or reading a novel, your mind subconsciously works on absorbing what you have learned. So it counts as study time, too.

Keep in mind when you are memorizing, whether it is math formulas or a foreign language or names and dates, that you are doing much more real learning more quickly than when you are reading a social studies text or an English essay.

The specialists say you will get your most effective studying done if you take a 10-minute break every hour. In fact, some good students study 45 minutes to an hour, and they take a five- to 10-minute break. The break is considered your reward and improves your learning over the next hour.

Dr. Walter Pauk, former Director of the Reading and Study Center at Cornell University, suggests you take that short break whenever you feel you need one. That way, you will not waste your time away by clock-watching and anticipating your break.

Another technique for keeping your mind from wandering while studying is to begin with your hardest or least favourite subject and work toward the easiest and/or the one you like best. Thus, your reward for studying the least favourite or hardest is studying the subject you like best. Try it; it works.

3. Separate the study of subjects that are alike.

Brain waves are like radio waves. If there is not enough space between input, you get interference. The more similar the kinds of learning taking place, the more interference. So, separate your study periods for courses with similar subject matter. Follow your studying of math with an hour of Spanish or history, not chemistry or statistics.

4. Do not study when you are tired.

Psychologists have found that everyone has a certain time of day when he or she gets sleepy. Do not try to study during that time (but do not go to sleep either - it hardly ever refreshes). Instead, schedule some physical activity for that period, such as recreation. If you have a stack of schoolwork, use that time to sort your notes or clear up your desk and get your books together or study with a friend.

5. Prepare for your class at the best time.

If it is a lecture course, do your studying soon after class; if it is a course in which students are called on to recite or answer questions, study before class. After the lecture, you can review and organize your notes. Before the recitation classes, you can spend your time memorizing, brushing up on your facts and preparing questions about the previous recitation. Question-posing is a good technique for helping the material sink in and for pinpointing areas in which you need more work.

6. Use the best note-taking system for you.

Quite a bit of research has been done on note-taking, and one system has emerged as the best. Use 8 1/2-by-11-inch loose-leaf paper and write on just one side. (This may seem wasteful, but it is one time when economizing is secondary.) Take the time to rule your page as follows:

- a. If the course is one in which lecture and text are closely related, use the 2-3-3-2 technique: Make columns of two inches down the left-hand side for recall clues, three inches in the middle for lecture notes and three inches on the right side for text notes. Leave a two-inch space across the bottom of the page for your own observations and conclusions. See Figure 20 (Three-Column Note-Taking System).
- b. If it is a course where the lectures and the reading are not closely related, use separate pages for class notes and reading notes, following the 2-5-1 technique: Two inches at left for recall clues, five in the middle for lecture notes and an inch at the right for observations and conclusions. (After a while, you will not need to draw actual lines.)

You have most likely taken your lecture notes in the form that evolved during your years of schooling. You have also probably evolved your own shorthand system, such as using a "g" for all "-ing" endings, an ampersand (&) for "and," and abbreviations for many words (e.g., govt. for government and evaptn. for evaporation).

The recall clue column is the key to higher marks. As soon as possible after you have written your notes, take the time to read them over - not studying them, just reading them. Check right away, while it is all still fresh, to see whether you have left out anything important or put down anything incorrectly, and make changes.

After reviewing what you have written, set down recall clue words to the topics in your notes. These clue words should not repeat information but should designate or label the kind of information that is in your notes. They are the kind of clues you would put on "crib sheets."

Example: To remember the information contained so far in this section on note-taking, you need just the following clues: 8 1/2-by-11, loose-leaf, one side: 2-3-3-2 or 2-5-1. As you can see, they are simply memory cues to use later on in your actual studying.

Dr. Robert A. Palmatier, Assistant Professor of Reading Education at the University of Georgia, suggests that you study for tests in the following manner:

- Take out your loose leaf pages and shift them around so the order makes the most sense for studying.
- Choose the first page and cover up the notes portion, leaving visible just the clues. See if you can recall the notes that go with the clues. As you get a page right, set it aside.
- If you are going to be taking a short-answer test, shuffle your note pages so that they are out of order. (That is why it is important to use just one side of the paper.) "This approach provides for learning without the support of logical sequence," Dr. Palmatier says, "thus, closely approximating the actual pattern in which the information must be recalled."
- If you are going to be taking an essay test, you can safely predict that "those areas on which the most notes are taken will most often be the areas on which essay questions will be based."

The beauty of the "recall clue word" note-taking method is that it provides a painless way to do the one thing proved to help you remember what you have learned - actively thinking about the notes and making logical sense of them in your mind. If, instead, you just keep going over your recorded notes, not only will you get bored, but you will be trying to memorize in the worst way possible.

7. Memorize actively, not passively.

Researchers have found that the worst way to memorize -- the way that takes the most time and results in the least retention -- is to simply read something over and over again. If that is the way you memorize, forget it. Instead, use as many of your senses as possible.

- Try to *visualize* in concrete terms, to get a picture in your head. In addition to sight use sound: Say the words out loud and *listen* to yourself saying them.
- Use association: Relate the fact to be learned to something personally significant or find a logical tie-in.

Examples: When memorizing dates, relate them to important events, the dates of which you already know. Use mnemonics: For example, the phrase "Every good boy does fine," is used for remembering the names of the musical notes on the lines of the treble clef. Use acronyms, like OK4R, which is the key to remembering the steps in the reading method outlined in number 8, below.

8. Read and study at the same time.

It really takes less time in the long run! Read with a purpose. Instead of just starting at the beginning and reading through to the end, you will complete the assignment much faster and remember much more if you first take the time to follow the OK4R method devised by Dr. Walter Pauk:

- **Overview** - Read the title, the introductory and summarizing paragraphs and all the headings included in the reading material. Then you will have a general idea of what topics will be discussed.
- **K - Key Ideas** - Go back and skim the text for the key ideas (usually found in the first sentence of each paragraph). Also read the italics and bold type, bulleted sections, itemizations, pictures and tables.
- **R1- Read** -your assignment from beginning to end. You will able to do it quickly, because you already know where the author is going and what he/she is trying to prove.
- **R2 - Recall** - Put aside the text and say or write, in a few key words or sentences, the major points of what you have read. It has been proven that most forgetting takes place immediately after initial learning. Dr. Pauk says, "One minute spent in immediate recall nearly doubles retention of that piece of data!"
- **R3 - Reflect** - The previous step helps to fix the material in your mind. To cement it there forever, relate it to other knowledge; find relationships and significance for what you have read.

- **R4 - Review** - This step does not take place right away. It should be done for the next short quiz, and then again for later tests throughout the term. Several reviews will make that knowledge indelibly yours.

9. Make up a colour and sign system for text and notes.

For your text, Dr. Palmatier suggests:

- Red for main ideas
- Blue for dates and numbers
- Yellow for supporting facts.
- Circles, boxes, stars and checks in the margins can also be utilized to make reviewing easy.
- Make your own glossary of the words and concepts you do not know.

In your notebook, underline, star or otherwise mark the ideas which your teacher tells you are important: thoughts to which you are told you will be coming back later, items which you are warned to be common mistakes. Watch for the words - such as *therefore* and *in essence* - which tell you what is being summarized. Always record examples. In fact, in such subjects as math, your notes should consist mainly of your teacher's examples.

Pay close attention in your note-taking until the last minute of class time. Often, a teacher gets sidetracked and runs out of time. He/she may jam up to a half-hour's content into the last five or 10 minutes of a lecture. Get down that packed-few minutes' worth. If necessary, stay on after class to get it all down.

10. Do not use books underlined by others.

Of course, if the book does not belong to you, you will not be underlining at all. But if you underline, do it sparingly. The best underlining is not as productive as the worst note-taking.

Over-underlining is a common fault of students; only the key words in a paragraph should be underlined. It should be done in ink or felt-tip highlighter, and it should be done only after you have finished the "OK" part of your OK4R reading.

You may tend to rely on it, and you have no idea whether the hand that helped the pencil got an "A*" or an "F" in the course! If, due to availability or finances, you have to buy an underlined textbook, mark it in a different colour.

Research has proven that it is not how much time you study that counts but how well you study during that time. In fact, in at least one survey, students who studied more than 35 hours a week came out with poorer grades than those who studied less.

Remember: Use your study time wisely, and you too will come out ahead.