

Simple Studying Tips

What is Effective Studying?

Studying properly encompasses conscientious effort and discipline to understand and apply the material required for the course. Effort and discipline can be defined here as an exertion of your will power, a desire to succeed. We might wish to get an A in a particular assignment, but unless we are willing to put in the effort necessary to obtain the best grade we can get, we will most likely not succeed in getting that A.

Studying properly also includes accomplishing those tasks that will help guarantee your best performance in the course. For example, taking good notes, asking questions when you do not understand, seeking clarification, using office hours wisely, completing assigned readings and assignments. Effective studying for exams does not start a week before the examination, it starts with the first day of class.

Of course, there are also techniques that will help you be more effective and efficient a learner. Some basic recommendations for studying include:

- **Spend time figuring out what kind of learner you may be.** There are many wonderful sites online that have learning style inventories, tests, and rubrics. Think deeply about the implications of learning styles and how the way you learn influences your performance in school. Dr. John Tenney has a site with links to many learning style resources:

http://www.willamette.edu/~jtenny/Tea_Resources/Learning_Styles/Learning%20Styles.html

- **Controlling and minimizing other distractions** (this includes, TV, radio, and friends).
- **Explore what questions, issues, or problems drive you to learn about a particular subject.** Good learning happens if you are driven by questions, by the seeking of answers that you need to have, not the other way around.
- **Setting up your study area in a corner in which you feel comfortable and that you think inspires you or gets your creative energies flowing.** This “study space” can be your room, the University library, or the public library, but find a space relatively free from distractions where you can focus on the task at hand.
- **Not going on marathon study sessions in an attempt to "get it all in" in one day.** That will only tire you mentally and will decrease understanding and retention of the material.
- **Organizing and prioritizing your study time.** If you need to devote more time to math, then plan to study math first, and for a longer amount of time. If you think that doing math first tires you out too much for history, then consider studying history first.
- **Incorporating breaks during your study time.** You need to stay rested, relaxed, and well hydrated to keep a clear mind.

Studying and Preparing for Exams

1. **Look at the details of the examination.** What are you being asked to do or know? Are you supposed to compare and contrast? Will the exam feature mostly questions that ask you to define concepts? Will you have to explain the details of a model? Will you have to interpret relationships? Do you have to use a particular theory to explain phenomena?
2. **Talk to your instructor before the exam.** Even though all instructors set up office hours and express their willingness to meet with students at mutually convenient hours, many students do not take advantage of such opportunities. Visit your instructor and find out what he is interested in evaluating. Ask the following questions: What are you looking to measure or evaluate? What level of mastery of the material are you

looking for us to have by this point? If you were to organize the exam material into three main categories what would those be? Will the exam feature multiple choice, short answer, essay, fill-in-the-blank, and matching questions? What percentage of the exam will be short answer or essay questions? You may also want to ask your instructor what he/she considers exemplary answers or criteria for evaluating short answer and essay questions. In any case, don't be afraid to talk to your teacher about these issues. The point of the examination is not to fail you but to allow you to demonstrate your understanding and mastery of the material you have learned.

3. **Do not just ask your teacher for a review sheet.** Review sheets rarely explain the relationships you need to know between concepts, and they only point to areas that you have covered in class. Besides, where have you been all semester long? Hopefully, paying attention in class and studying every day. Come to reviews prepared with questions, answers, and examples you want to test out. Above all, do not come to a review expecting that the teacher will explain everything covered up to that point in the semester. If you did not get it before the review, how do you expect to learn it all in one day? Make the review your own. Prepare in advance according to your own learning style and come ready to effectively use the time allotted to seek clarification of your understanding.
4. **Draw or sketch concepts.** This goes hand in hand with figuring out what kind of learner you are. You might be a visual learner, or much more of an abstract than a sequential learner. Drawing concept maps can be very powerful in "seeing" relationships between ideas and in generating questions to drive your study. In addition, as you take notes remember to draw symbols that help you conceptualize the ideas covered. Don't be afraid to doodle or draw in the margins. Does a particular concept make you think of a cat, a friend, or a member of your family? Associating a concept or theory with an image might help you remember it better.
5. **Study Everywhere.** Studying does not have to be done only when you get home, sitting in a desk, by writing outlines, or highlighting a book. Sometimes it is more effective to study during those times when you find yourself in-between other activities. For instance, during lunch you can think about the major points discussed in lecture. Perhaps on the way home you can concentrate on some key points. While waiting for an elevator you can quickly amuse yourself by imagining your professor and visualizing them explaining a concept. Be creative, use your time even in small increments wisely. The result will be that you will spend more "quality" time thinking about the subject matter.
6. **Divide the learning materials into smaller "chunks."** You can grasp concepts better if you logically organize them in ways that will help you remember them. Providing an order or "method to the madness" is something that your instructor tries to do in class. You should try to find the logic behind such organization and see if you can find the connections that suggest that organizing scheme. Feel free to create your own organization and check with your instructor for "goodness of fit."
7. **Study with a friend.** Choose a friend in the same class. Develop questions for each other and exchange answers and approaches to solving questions. Do not take anything for granted. Question your friend's understanding of the concepts, and his or her explanations. Have your friend do the same for you and strive to provide the best possible answer you can. You can also invite another friend to study with you, but remember that the larger the group the less time you spend studying.
8. **Use email to study.** Yes, write the questions you have and send them to a friend or colleague from class. The benefit is in the crafting of the questions and thinking through the material. Don't write obvious or superficial questions. Another variation of this is to write "exam" questions for a friend. You benefit from thinking out the questions and mapping out possible answers. After your friend has finished the "exam" grade it and go over the answers together.
9. **Develop a web page that explains various concepts learned in class.** Again, this helps you develop time on task, and makes you think about how to explain the concepts. Keep distractions to a minimum. The task

is not to make an intricately designed web page, but to organize the information effectively. Think of others coming across your page. Would they be able to understand the material?

- 10. Explain the concepts or material to a few friends.** After dividing the material in small "chunks" try to explain it to a friend. Concentrate on having your friend understand the concept. This is the basic, teach-it-to-somebody-else approach. This is the best way to improve retention of any material learned. Extend this approach by trying these prompts: **a)** If you had to explain this concept to your mom, how would you do it? **b)** If you had to explain this idea and provide examples to your brother's third grade class, how would you do it? Think about which parts of the concepts were more difficult to explain and focus on developing a clear understanding of those.
- 11. Find examples.** When studying, do not rely solely on examples provided in class by the instructor. Find or make your own examples. Try to apply the concepts learned outside of the scope provided by the instructor and see what comes up. Follow this up by asking probing and clarifying questions during class time.
- 12. Tell yourself a story; or tell your friends a story.** Take a section of what you are trying to learn and organize it in such a way that you can convey it in the form of a story. Go ahead and make up interesting characters, a plot, and exciting events.
- 13. Get silly with class material.** Create a song using new terminology learned in class. Write a poem or a letter in which you explain a particular concept. Dance with your lecture notes. Whatever you do, enjoy it.
- 14. Have a positive attitude about yourself and the learning process.** Don't undermine your own learning by being negative about yourself or the learning process. Erase from your vocabulary such phrases like: "I can't get this," "I can't do this," "I'm awful at..." "Why bother, I'm going to fail anyway..." Remember the old adage: "The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary." Don't dismiss studying or struggling with difficult concepts just because they are hard to master. Learning takes time and discipline.
- 15. Talk to yourself.** You can find a quiet spot and talk with yourself about learning, about the class, about how you'd teach this material to others, etc. Reflection about your learning is essential for learning itself. As you study take some time to answer the following questions:
 - Another example of this might be...
 - The last time I saw a problem like this was...
 - I remember talking about this issue with...
 - This information might explain why...
 - What would happen if I changed this...