

# HOW TO BE A BETTER STUDENT: A KEY TO EFFECTIVE STUDYING

William Doverspike, Ph.D.

Drdoverspike.com

770-913-0506

Academic psychologists have researched a variety of behaviors that contribute to the formation of good study habits. By practicing these habits on a daily basis, students have been shown to improve their classroom performance.

**Attend all classes.** It may seem like stating the obvious, but some students find it difficult to develop the self-discipline required to simply get up and go to class. Like many things in life, showing up counts.

**Be prepared for class.** Be sure to complete reading assignments before—rather than after—each class. By reading the assignments before class, you place yourself in a better position to ask questions for clarification. More importantly, you are in a better position to answer questions that the teacher may ask.

**Sit in the front row.** Giving an apple to a teacher will not get you noticed by the teacher as much as simply sitting at the front of the class. Teachers know that some the top students sit near the front of the class. To be a better student, you must first become a better student.

**Get involved in class discussion.** Participate in class and group discussions whenever possible as a means of improving your understanding. The more you can articulate an idea, the better you will comprehend it.

**Take notes in class.** Even when exams are not based on class notes, the notes will often give an indication of what topics the instructor has emphasized for the course. During class, it is best to listen attentively and take outline notes.

**Fill in the gaps of notes.** The best time to fill in the gaps of notes is as soon as possible after class. The sooner the notes are reviewed after class, the more material will be available to add to the notes. Comparing notes with other students also helps to fill in the gaps.

**Take notes while studying.** Make time to take thoughtful notes. Leave plenty of space for additions and corrections. Do not record long, detailed passages. Instead, use an outline or bullet points with sub-bullets. Put the most important points in your notes.

**Write notes in your own words.** Whether in class or while studying, write in your own words. Record the main ideas in your reading or listening. Notes in your own words will make more sense later, when you review them.

**Rewrite notes in your own words.** Rewriting notes create an opportunity to rehearse and replay what was said and done in class. When notes are rewritten shortly after class, much more is likely to be recalled in order to fill in the gaps.

**Consider using concept maps.** Note cards can often become more effective if they are used to connect single pieces of information on each card to other concepts through a concept map. Whether the maps are drawn by hand or created with software, they should emphasize substance over form. Their purpose is to make connections that help you see the content from different perspectives (Berry & Chew, 2008).

**Understand your assignment.** Understand what your assignment covers before you begin to study, so that you don't waste time doing unnecessary work. Empirical research has shown that when a student has a better idea of a task, he or she will learn it better and faster.

**Keep your work up to date.** Strive to keep your work up to date. If you have to work to make up, it will be on your mind and prevent you from feeling free to learn new material. In some courses, such as mathematics, accounting, and chemistry, it is absolutely necessary to perform equations or word problems on a daily basis because subsequent skills build on previous ones. Aim to work things out for yourself, but if you are still confused, seek advice before you get discouraged.

**Put work before play.** The adage "work before you play" is an old-fashioned concept known as "grand-ma's rule." Known as Premack's Principle (Premack, 1959), this behavioral strategy can be effective in increasing target behaviors (such as studying). The way to increase a low frequency behavior such as studying is to follow it with a high frequency behavior (daydreaming, surfing the Internet, talking on phone, watching videos, goofing off, doing nothing). In this way, the high frequency behavior serves to reinforce and increase the low frequency behavior.

**Set up a regular study schedule.** Set up a study schedule and do not let anything interfere with it. Do this by dividing an entire week into hour-long segments and then marking off each of these for a specific activity.

**Set aside a time for studying.** Allow yourself a solid block of time for studying, so that you will not waste time starting and stopping again and again. When the time for studying comes, begin promptly. Don't allow yourself to be distracted before you even begin. Be sure to take breaks every hour or so.

**Reserve a special place for studying.** Don't hop around the house reading here and there. Try to establish what educational psychologists call *place habit*. Use a comfortable *study chair* for studying. Don't use the *study chair* for sleeping, and don't study in bed.

**Use a warm up period before studying.** Do some easy studying first, thus getting yourself into the swing of studying before you tackle the more difficult work. Using an analogy to physical exercise, your mind needs a warm up period before working out. Study your most difficult work while you are still fresh and—if possible—break the lesson into small units which are more manageable.

**Keep external distractions to a minimum.** Arrange a study environment that is quiet and free of distractions. Strive to ignore minor noise and distractions. If the noise is distracting, and you can't do anything about it, use a different place to study.

**Strive to ignore internal distractions.** Set aside personal worries during study time. Settle unanswered questions that are on your mind before you sit down to study. Keep a pad next to you to jot down any outside problems that come to mind while studying, allowing yourself to concentrate on the lesson at hand.

**Consistency rather than intensity.** *Distributed practice* (also known as spaced practice) is a learning strategy in which practice is broken up into a number of short sessions over a long period of time. Students learn more effectively when they train in several sessions spread out over a long period of time, rather than studying repeatedly in a short period of time.

**Avoid cramming the night before exams.** *Massed practice* (the opposite of distributed practice) consists of fewer and longer training sessions. It is a much less effective method of learning when compared to spaced practice. Although it is a less effective method, cramming is often used by students who procrastinate and then experience intense pre-test anxiety, which they attempt to handle through cramming.

**Review what you have learned.** Reserve a few moments shortly before each class period to review mentally what you have studied. Try to do this by only glancing at your notes and not reading them. The day before an exam is also a good time to do a final review.

**Test yourself to see if you are learning.** Ask yourself questions that you think you might be included in an exam and see if you can answer them. Practice taking timed tests at home.

**Strive to keep mentally alert.** Keep mentally alert throughout the study period. Take a brisk walk, deep-breathe near an open window, do some a physical exercise, or splash some cold water on your face. An excellent refresher might even involve taking your “morning shower” during your evening study period.

**Avoid the use of alcohol or drugs.** Never use alcohol, marijuana, or any other drugs prior to studying, when studying, or before a test. Drugs and medications may affect your brain’s efficiency and reduce your learning ability. Some over-the-counter medications such as cold preparations can also reduce alertness and cause drowsiness.

**Take a complete rest when stuck.** Take a complete rest or change if you feel stale, restless, or irritable. Particularly with some types of math problems, sometimes the solution comes easier if you “let it go” and return to it later.

**Set up a time for relaxation.** Have a systematic plan for a brief rest after school hours. The best time for this is right after you arrive home or just before dinner time. Remember, a fresh mind requires more than a stale body to function at peak efficiency.

**Get enough sleep each night.** Sleep deprivation reduces learning efficiency. Because learning is consolidated in the brain during sleep cycles, getting sufficient sleep each night improves your learning ability.

### References

- Berry, J. W., & Chew, S. L. (2008). Improving learning through interventions of student-generated questions and concept maps. *Teaching of Psychology, 35*, 305–312.
- Premack, D. (1959). Toward empirical behavior laws: I. Positive reinforcement. *Psychological Review, 66*(4), 219–233.

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Published December 01, 2008 | Last updated Nov. 01, 2023

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**Content was last updated 2023.**

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2008, December 1). *Learning how to be a better student: A key to effective studying*.  
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