

# 10 Highly Effective Study Habits

Students grapple with many issues in their lives, and because of all of the competing things for your attention, it's hard to concentrate on studying. And yet if you're in school, you have to do at least a little studying in order to progress from year to year. The key to effective studying isn't cramming or studying longer, but **studying smarter**. You can begin studying smarter with these ten proven and effective study habits.

## 1. How you approach studying matters

Too many people look at studying as a necessary task, not an enjoyment or opportunity to learn. That's fine, but researchers have found that **how** you approach something matters almost as much as what you do. Being in the right mindset is important in order to study smarter.

Sometimes you can't "force" yourself to be in the right mindset, and it is during such times you should simply avoid studying. If you're distracted by a relationship issue, an upcoming game, or finishing an important project, then studying is just going to be an exercise in frustration. Come back to it when you're not focused (or obsessed!) by something else going on in your life.

Way to help improve your study mindset:

- *Aim to think positively when you study*, and remind yourself of your skills and abilities.
- *Avoid catastrophic thinking*. Instead of thinking, "I'm a mess, I'll never have enough time to study for this exam," look at it like, "I may be a little late to study as much as I'd like, but since I'm doing it now, I'll get most of it done."
- *Avoid absolute thinking*. Instead of thinking "I always mess things up," the more objective view is, "I didn't do so well that time, what can I do to improve?"
- *Avoid comparing yourself with others*, because you usually just end up feeling bad about yourself.

## 2. Where you study is important

A lot of people make the mistake of studying in a place that really isn't conducive to concentrating. A place with a lot of distractions makes for a poor study area. If you try and study in your dorm room, for instance, you may find the computer, TV, or a roommate more interesting than the reading material you're trying to digest.

The library, a nook in a student lounge or study hall, or a quiet coffee house are good places to check out. Make sure to choose the quiet areas in these places, not the loud, central gathering areas. Investigate multiple places on-campus and off-campus, don't just pick the first one you find as "good enough" for your needs and habits. Finding an ideal study place is important, because it's one you can reliably count on for the next few years.

## 3. Bring everything you need, nothing you don't

Unfortunately, when you find an ideal place to study, sometimes people bring things they don't need. For instance, while it may seem ideal to type notes into a computer to refer back to later, computers are a powerful distraction for many people because they can do so many different things. Playing games, going online, IM'ing, surfing the Web, and answering emails are all wonderful distractions that have nothing to do with studying. So ask yourself whether you really need a computer to take notes, or whether you can make do with the old-fashioned paper and pen or pencil.

Don't forget the things you need to study for the class, exam or paper you're focusing on for the study session.

Nothing is more time-consuming and wasteful than having to run back and forth regularly because you forget an important book, paper, or some other resource you need to be successful. If you study best with your favorite music playing, make sure your iPod is with you.

#### **4. Outline and rewrite your notes**

Most people find that keeping to a standard outline format helps them boil information down to its most basic components. People find that connecting similar concepts together makes it easier to remember when the exam comes around. The important thing to remember in writing outlines is that an outline only works as a learning tool when it is in your own words and structure. Every person is unique in how they put similar information together (called “chunking” by cognitive psychologists). So while you’re welcomed to copy other people’s notes or outlines, make sure you translate those notes and outlines into your own words and concepts. Failing to do this is what often causes many students to stumble in remembering important items.

It may also be helpful to use as many senses as possible when studying, because information is retained more readily in people when other senses are involved. That’s why writing notes works in the first place – it puts information into words and terms you understand. Mouthing the words out loud while you copy the notes before an important exam can be one method for involving yet another sense.

#### **5. Use [memory](#) games (mnemonic devices)**

Memory games, or **mnemonic devices**, are methods for remembering pieces of information using a simple association of common words. Most often people string together words to form a nonsense sentence that is easy to remember. The first letter of each word can then be used to stand for something else – the piece of information you’re trying to remember. The most common mnemonic device example is “Every Good Boy Deserves Fun.” Putting the first letters of every word together – EGBDF – gives a music student the five notes for treble clef.

The key to such memory devices is the new phrase or sentence you come up with has to be more memorable and easier to remember than the terms or information you’re trying to learn. These don’t work for everyone, so if they don’t work for you, don’t use them.

Mnemonic devices are helpful because you use more of your brain to remember visual and active images than you do to remember just a list of items. Using more of your brain means better memory.

#### **6. Practice by yourself or with friends**

The old age adage, practice makes perfect, is true. You can practice by yourself by testing yourself with either practice exams, past quizzes, or flash cards (depending what kind of course it is and what’s available). If a practice exam isn’t available, you can make one up for yourself and your classmates (or find someone who will). If a practice or old exam from a course is available, use it as a guide – do not study to the practice or old exam! (Too many students treat such exams as the real exams, only to be disappointed when the real exam has none of the same questions). Such exams help you understand the breadth of content and types of questions to expect, not the actual material to study for.

Some people enjoy reviewing their materials with a group of friends or classmates. Such groups work best when they’re kept small (4 or 5 others), with people of similar academic aptitude, and with people taking the same class. Different formats work for different groups. Some groups like to work through chapters together, quizzing one another as they go through it. Others like to compare class notes, and review materials that way, ensuring they haven’t missed any critical points. Such study groups can be helpful for many students, but not all.

#### **7. Make a schedule you can stick to**

Too many people treat studying as the thing to do when you get around to it or have some spare time. But if you

schedule study time just as your class time is scheduled, you'll find it becomes much less of a hassle in the long run. Instead of last-minute cramming sessions, you'll be better prepared because you haven't put off all the studying into one 12-hour marathon. Spending 30 or 60 minutes every day you have a class studying for that class before or after is a lot easier and will allow you to actually **learn** more of the material.

You should study regularly throughout the semester for as many classes as you can. Some people study every day, others put it off to once or twice a week. The frequency isn't as important as actually studying on a regular basis. Even if you just crack open a book once a week for a class, it's better than waiting until the first exam in a massive cram session.

Scheduling is even more important if you're going to be a part of a study group. If only half of your members are committed to a study group for every meeting, then you need to find other study group members who are as committed as you are.

## **8. Take breaks (and rewards!)**

Because so many people view studying as a chore or task, it's human nature to avoid it. If, however, you find rewards to help reinforce what you're doing, you may be pleasantly surprised by the change you may find in your attitude over time.

Rewards start by chunking study time into manageable components. Studying for 4 hours at a time with no breaks is not realistic or fun for most people. Studying for 1 hour, and then taking a 5 minute break and grabbing a snack is usually more sustainable and enjoyable. Divide study time into segments that make sense and work for you. If you have to digest a whole textbook chapter, find sections in the chapter and commit to reading and taking notes on one section at a time. Maybe you only do one section in a sitting, maybe you do two. Find the limits that seem to work for you.

If you succeed in your goals (such as doing two sections of a chapter in one sitting), give yourself a real reward. Perhaps it's saying, "I'll treat myself to some good dessert tonight at dinner," or "I can buy a new tune online," or "I can spend an extra 30 minutes gaming for every 2 sections of a book chapter I read." The point is to find a reward that is small but real, and to stick to it. Some may view this as absurd, since you're setting limits you can easily ignore. But by setting these limits on your behavior, you're actually teaching yourself discipline, which will be a handy skill to have throughout life.

## **9. Keep healthy and balanced**

It's hard to live a balanced life while in school, I know. But the more balance you seek out in your life, the easier every component in your life becomes. If you spend all of your time focusing on a relationship or a game, you can see how easy it is to be out of balance. When you're out of balance, the things you're not focusing on – such as studying – become that much harder. Don't spend all of your time studying – have friends, keep in touch with your family, and find interests outside of school that you can pursue and enjoy.

Finding balance isn't really something that can be taught, it's something that comes with experience and simply living. But you can work to try and keep your health and body balanced, by doing what you already know – exercise regularly and eat right. There are no shortcuts to health. Vitamins and herbs might help you in the short-term, but they're not substitute for real, regular meals and a dose of exercise every now and again (walking to class is a start, but only if you're spending an hour or two a day doing it).

Look at vitamins and herbs as they are intended – as supplements to your regular, healthy diet. Common herbs – such as ginkgo, ginseng, and gotu kola – may help you enhance mental abilities, including concentration, aptitude, behavior, alertness and even intelligence. But they may not, either, and you shouldn't rely on them instead of studying regularly.

## 10. Know what the expectations are for the class

Different professors and teachers have different expectations from their students. While taking good notes and listening in class (and attending as many of the classes as you can) are good starts, you can do one better by spending some time with the instructor or professor's assistant. Talking to the instructor early on – especially if you foresee a difficult course ahead – will help you understand the course requirements and the professor's expectations. Maybe most students in the class are expected to get a "C" because the material is so difficult; knowing that ahead of time helps set your expectations, too.

Pay attention in class. If the instructor writes something on the whiteboard or displays it on the screen, it's important. But if they say something, that's important too. Copy these things down as they're presented, but don't zone out completely from what the instructor is also saying. Some students focus on the written materials without regard for what the instructor is saying. If you write down only one aspect of the professor's instructions (e.g., just what they write down), you're probably missing about half the class.

If you get a particularly bad grade on a paper or exam, talk to the instructor. Try and understand where things went wrong, and what you can do in the future to help reduce it from happening again.

### Don't forget to learn!

Studying isn't just about passing an exam, as most students look at it as. Studying is an effort to actually learn things, some of which you might actually care about. So while you'll have to take your share of classes that have little or nothing to do with your interests, you should still look for interesting things to take away from every experience.

By the time you'll realize what a great opportunity school is, you'll be well into the middle of your life with a lot of responsibilities – children, mortgages, career pressures, etc. Then most people have neither the time nor energy to go back to school. So take the time to learn some stuff now, because you'll appreciate the opportunity later on.

*Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* and is a founding board member and treasurer of the Society for Participatory Medicine.

### APA Reference

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