

Study Skills 101

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Doing More of the Same Produces More of the Same (AKA Study with a Shovel, Not a Spoon)

Many students are afraid that the key to doing better in school is to spend much more time on homework. That might not be true, though. If you are actually spending a reasonable amount of time studying and doing assignments for a class, but you still do not get good results, you may just need to do something different.

Imagine that you have to dig a large hole, and the first tool you try to use is a small plastic spoon. Your results will be disappointing, right? Is the best solution to spend twice as much time digging with the same spoon or to use your digging time better by using a shovel?



You've heard people tell you to study, but it's likely that nobody ever told you how. Many students' study methods are about as effective as digging with a spoon, simply because nobody has shown them how to study with a shovel.

Here's an example of studying with a spoon: I have spent an hour and a half studying for each Biology test, but I am barely passing. I study by looking (or staring) at notes and books, though I don't seem to remember much, and my attention drifts in and out. Would it make sense for me to start spending three hours staring at notes and books? Probably not. Perhaps I can spend my 90 minutes on a different approach.

So, how do you study with a shovel? There are many possibilities, and you will probably find that what works well in one class is not very useful in another one because there is no one correct way to study. Changing your methods won't always be easy, and it will require some practice, just like any new skill. Here are a few things that you can try:

- ✓ **Realize that you control your habits.**
- ✓ **Use your class time well.**
- ✓ **Be proactive.**
- ✓ **Study actively.** If staring at books isn't working, then stop staring. Try doing something active like taking notes when you read and making your own study guides based on class notes, book notes, and handouts. Focusing on each paragraph to pick out the main idea and any new terms forces you to pay attention to what you're reading. The act of writing notes helps you to process and recall the information better.

- ✓ **Test yourself.** You can test yourself with flashcards or by answering your own questions. This is especially easy in math classes. Most teachers don't assign every problem for homework. You can compile some of the extra problems (ones with answers in the book) and use them as a practice test a couple of days before the real test.

I. Habits- They Can Make You or Break You. Which Do You Choose?

Many students come to the guidance office and declare that they are procrastinators as if it's a congenital birth defect or incurable disease. "That's just how I am," they say. Fortunately, procrastinating is not a birth defect; it's just a habit. Students who wait until they go off to college before trying to improve their study habits face an uphill battle. It's easier to quit your bad habits and replace them with helpful ones when you are still in high school.

Unfortunately, we do not have a patch or a pill that helps people stop procrastinating, so you'll have to do it the old-fashioned way...with practice and determination. Building a new habit is a process that requires 21 days. So, when you resolve to change a habit, just do it and stick with it for a month. Remember that those 21 days are going to come and go regardless of what you choose to do. Wouldn't you like to have better habits when day 22 arrives?

II. Use Your Class Time Well

Do you have poor listening habits? Why spend so much of your time catching up and going tutorial after school if you aren't using your class time wisely? Doesn't it make more sense to be sure that you make the most of your class time first? Of course it does. When we struggle in a class, we have many different ways of becoming poor listeners. See the attachment about poor listening habits. We all have at least some of them from time to time. The first thing you have to do in order to improve is to make a conscious decision to pay attention and do your best.



III. Proactive- It's Not Just an Acne Medication

Homework and Review:

"How much homework do you have tonight?"

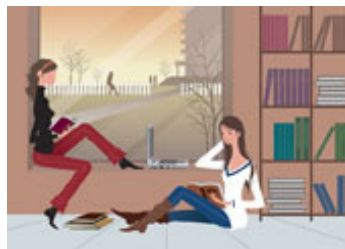
This can be a tricky question. Many students' definition of homework would read like this: "Homework is written work that must be submitted or shown to the teacher. See also: Boring, Torture, Tediousness."



The truth is that there is more to homework than written assignments. A much better definition of homework would be: “Homework is any work, written or unwritten, assigned by a teacher plus regular review of notes.” Students with the best study habits will review their class notes daily to help learn and remember the material better, regardless of what has been assigned. We’ll talk about that more in a minute.

Has this ever happened to you? It’s Wednesday night. You had math class yesterday, and some homework problems were assigned. That assignment is due tomorrow. You went home tonight and started working on the homework, only to discover that you are completely lost. After straining for a while to remember how to do these problems, you feel as though you’ve been tortured for days, so you give up and get a zero or partial credit on the homework assignment. Not only do you have a bad homework grade, but you have also missed the chance to practice math problems and will have to work harder to catch up before the next test.

What could you do differently? One solution is simple, if you do your homework on the night that it is assigned (instead of the night before it’s due), then you are more likely to remember how to do something. If you still have trouble, you can see your teacher the next day and ask questions. You could still have your homework done on time.



Test Preparation & Studying

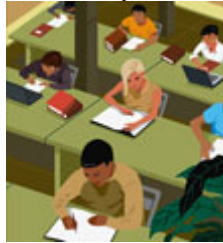
Many students wait until the night before a test to begin studying, even if they are not procrastinators. In a way, it seems logical to do your studying just before the test. However, that tends not to be the absolute best way to study. You’ll definitely want some extra time the night before a test to do some extra studying, but the best method is to begin preparing for the test on the day that you start learning new material for the test.

Here’s one example:

A teacher gives you a list of 20 vocabulary words and announces that you will have a quiz in five days. Let’s say that you plan to spend about 30 minutes studying for this quiz, and your plan might be to study for 25 minutes the night before the quiz and 5 minutes on the morning of the quiz. However, many people will remember the words better (and for a longer period of time) if they study and review the definitions repeatedly over several days for short periods of time. The same 30 minute study period may be much more effective if broken up into smaller chunks over a few days, and it’s much easier than devoting a whole block of time.

If you spend just a few minutes reviewing your class notes, handouts, and other materials each night, you will tend to be much more confident and better prepared for tests. You will also remember the material for a longer period of time and will be more likely to ask good questions in class. Those few minutes spent reviewing each class every day can produce big results. If you don't have any written assignments in a class, do not convince yourself that you have no homework. Just take a few minutes to review and prepare or to start working on a long term project that has been assigned.

Start by trying to remember what you learned in class without referring to your notes. The points you didn't remember may be the ones you need to review most.



Listening Habits:

The following are some bad listening habits identified in an article called "What Can Be Done About Listening?" by Ralph G. Nichols. The full article, with all ten of Nichols' bad listening habits can be found here: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/docs/10_bad_listening_habits.doc

1. Calling the Subject Dull

"I hate science. It's so boring."

2. Criticizing the Speaker

"This teacher is stupid."

3. Trying To Write Everything

Notes should summarize what the teacher said.

Don't try to write a transcript detailing every word the teacher says.

4. Faking Attention

This is something that we all do from time to time. Don't let it be a habit.

5. Tolerating Distraction

Tell your friend that you can talk later.

Note Taking:

The California Polytechnic Institute has a great website detailing several different note-taking systems: <http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/notetaking.systems.html>