PRACTICAL TIPS FOR STUDY IMPROVEMENT

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This summary contains important information that can immediately improve your study skills—if you are willing to work at it. Forty years of experience helping students deal with their study problems is condensed here in a series of brief indications. For best results, select one at a time and improve one before moving on to another. All deficiencies cannot be removed at once, but with patient and persistent effort you can improve little by little, enjoy your studies more, learn more in less time, and get better grades.

A Few Preliminaries

1) No one can study well if basic attitudes toward self, others, and life in general are improperly formed. Since study habits form an intimate part of your life, you must have clear, consistent, and realistic objectives (at least tentative ones) if you expect to study well. Know what you are doing and why!

2) For the present, be aware of your talents and limitations in background, ability, and achievement so as to capitalize on the pluses and work at reducing the minuses. If there are some serious learning obstacles in your path (high school deficiencies or writing problems, for example) seek the necessary assistance to remedy them!

3) If you come to suspect that you are in the “wrong field” (often because of parental or peer pressure), check it out before you go any further. Try a course or two in subjects you suspect you might be better qualified for. Don’t let your studies be excessively dominated by vocational or career concerns. Education is primarily intended for self-development, not fitting into some “niche.” Fit your career to yourself, not yourself to a career!

4) Be optimistic about the future, about your ability to stretch in order to reach high goals, and about the ways formal education can help. Always keep your priorities in order, and above all, stay calm! Your “mistakes” can be important means toward self-improvement, so don’t be afraid of them!

5) Look upon teachers as partners and professional colleagues, not competitors or adversaries. Focus on their positive features, not on their drawbacks. Talk with them regularly outside of class, especially when you don’t understand why they think something is important. But preserve an independent judgment; no matter what you see or hear, don’t lose your basic common sense!
I - Concentration

Training the mind to concentrate on the work at hand is the most important study skill of all. Everyone can improve in the capacity to concentrate for longer periods of time and at deeper levels by always studying at “the right time” and in “the right place.”

TIME

1) Presuming they are getting sufficient sleep, most people experience peak mental alertness for about nine hours a day. Given the conventional schedule our society operates with, these hours are usually in mid-morning, mid-afternoon, and mid-evening. Try to utilize them exclusively for classes and study periods, avoiding things that require less mental energy (for example, e-mail or news reports). Instead of going back and forth between your room and classrooms, use morning and afternoon free periods for study or library work. This way you can get twice as much done in a given amount of time each day.

2) Do not mix study with recreation. Hold conversation (direct or electronic) for the in-between hours, just before or after meals. Work fully when you work, and rest fully when you rest. For example, reading in bed or with surrounding distractions makes concentration drop and lengthens the time it takes to complete assignments.

3) Get into the habit of planning ahead, while remaining flexible enough to deal with the unexpected. A study schedule helps to expend mental energy more efficiently; it frees you to do more in the available time. A well thought-out study schedule allots about 60 hours a week to classes and study, leaving 30 hours for recreation, conversation, athletics, and extra-curricular activities. Another 10 hours per day remain for sleep and meals. A proven way to capitalize on our physiological makeup is to rise and retire at approximately the same time every day, allowing between 7 and 8 hours for sleep.

4) At the beginning of a term make a personal calendar with due dates of major assignments and exams. This allows you to pace yourself and avoid pile-ups at the end. Start on long assignments weeks before they are due.

PLACE

1) Select study places that provide conducive conditions (lighting, quiet, firm chair, adequate working space, ready access to books and supplies), and a minimum of distractions (including the likelihood of interruptions).

2) If you always study in the same places, they will quickly provide mental associations that favor concentration. If you study in a variety of places, concentration goes down and it takes longer to do assignments.

3) This works best if you have no more than two regular study places—one on campus (library, classroom, study hall) and one at home (as far away as possible from traffic patterns). Never try to do serious study in your bedroom or multi-purpose areas, for their “mental associations” conflict with study.
II - Communication

The substance of study is the communication of ideas. This is the source of all that we learn, whether directly from people or indirectly from their writings. Hence the second most important study skill is attunement of the mind to the communication of ideas. This requires special effort because ideas are conveyed imperfectly through arbitrary symbols we call language (alphabets, words, sentences, paragraphs), and these can impede our learning if we treat them as ends rather than as means. (For example, the “word habit” and rote memorization of word formulas without understanding their meaning or why they are important.) Communication of ideas through language occurs in oral and written form; thus, most of what we learn comes through speech and books (printed or electronic).

SPEECH

1) You can train your ears by listening for ideas in lectures and discussions, taking an active and informed interest rather than passively hearing spoken words. As you listen, try to anticipate what is coming next, always looking for the outline or pattern of the speaker’s thoughts.

2) The principal aid to active listening is note taking—recording in outline the substance of what is said or depicted. Since it is difficult for most people and impossible for some to listen and write at the same time, spend as little time writing as possible. You can record the main ideas without losing the train of thought by developing a personal “shorthand” system of abbreviations. Don’t try to spell out the words as if you were writing a paper. Just write enough to be able to recall the outline of a lecture and fill it in later. Use loose-leaf binders that permit shifting of pages and insertion of handouts.

3) It also helps to learn from speakers (teachers and fellow students) the better you get to know them. Investigate at the outset each teacher’s credentials and take advantage of office hours to ask for background information relevant to a course (approach to the subject, selection of resources, etc.). Teachers can be helpful advisers in planning studies and selecting among career options; some are potentially life-long colleagues in the educational enterprise. Do not underestimate the importance of the student-teacher relationship, and recognize that this places high priority on selecting teachers carefully.

READING MATERIALS

1) You can train your eyes by looking for ideas on the printed or electronic page, taking an active interest in what is written there rather than passively seeing words and illustrations. Learning advances not by reading much but by reading selectively—just what is necessary to transfer an author’s ideas from his mind to yours. Learn in advance as much as you can about the author’s credentials and why your teacher has selected this particular author.
2) First, survey the passage (e.g., a chapter in a book) to get a general orientation to content. Make use of topical questions the author may have provided at the beginning or end. Make use of the index at the back of the book to see what the important ideas are, the extent to which they are emphasized, and how the author relates them to each other. This will put questions in your mind as you begin to read.

3) Second, let your eye move briskly through the passage by looking for answers to those questions. When you find one, record it in your notebook (rather than using a highlighter); rephrase and shorten the author’s words, using your system of abbreviations.

4) Go back and read more carefully the passages where you found the author’s chief ideas so as to learn how they are developed and what conclusions are drawn from them. Questions, comments, or observations should arise in your own mind as you read; these go in the bottom section of each notebook page. They can be introduced into class discussion as the teacher guides the class toward deeper meaning and understanding of the topic.

III - Review

1) This final skill is necessary in order to fix in your mind what you have studied for later recall—on examinations, and thereafter through the rest of your formal education and beyond. The means for frequent review are the notes you have taken of reading assignments and classroom proceedings. What works best is to have a separate section in your binder for each class, with class notes and reading notes on facing pages.

2) By spending half an hour at the end of each study day and a little more on the weekend, these reviews will give you a comprehensive overview of the course sequence and make you ready for examination at any time. As you review, mark key terms, dates, or definitions in red so they can be quickly reviewed just before tests or quizzes.

3) Regularly reviewing builds self-confidence about what you are learning so as to avoid the “exam panic” that causes even good students to lose their balance. The best preparation for major examinations is to trust the knowledge your good study habits have secured and “take a good break” by relaxing and retiring early. Success is guaranteed!