

Studying Effectively

Managing Your Academic Experience



One of the things students often find the most overwhelming about the college atmosphere is the amount of work they must do outside of their classes. Especially at a community college, balancing schoolwork, employment, and social lives can be a daunting task. Many instructors often give the formula, "For every hour of class, you should spend three hours studying." While that is indeed good advice, it's often an unrealistic goal for a community college student. Even so, when you take classes in college, you should expect to do actual work outside of the classroom rather than paying "lip service" to studying.

Learning Styles

Everyone learns differently. Some people are *visual learners*; they benefit from study aids they can see, such as graphs and charts and pictures. They also tend to retain more of what they read, and they get the most benefit from textbooks. Others are *auditory learners*; they study best from things they can hear. They tend to retain information they hear in a lecture and sometimes benefit from tape-recording lectures. Auditory learners also tend to learn well from mnemonic devices. For example, they might remember the mathematical order of operations with "Please exclude my dear Aunt Sally" (parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, and subtraction), or the eight planets of the Solar System with "My very excellent mother just sent us nachos" (Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune).

Other students are *tactile learners*, who learn best from a hands-on approach. They benefit from *doing* more than reading or listening. Like visual learners, tactile learners often retain information well by taking good notes, but for different reasons: where a visual learner retains information by reviewing his or her notes, a tactile learner retains information simply through the *act of writing*.

Of course, very few students can fit themselves neatly into a single learning style. Most often, a particular student will learn *predominantly* through one learning style or another but will still have *some* strengths and weaknesses associated with the other learning styles. Others have no particularly dominant learning style and can adapt to almost any method of delivery. The important thing is to try and recognize which ways you learn best so you can play to your strengths when you study. Regardless of your learning style, there are things you can do that will help you perform better.

Textbook Study Aids

One of the easiest things you can do to improve your study skills is simply to use the tools your textbook gives you. Most textbooks have built-in study aids that can help you focus your reading better. They may take many forms, such as chapter outlines, focus questions, or learning objectives, just to name a few. These study tools aren't put there just so teachers can easily assign extra work; they're very meticulously designed to reinforce the concepts of the chapter you're reading. If you're going to be tested on a chapter and want to study the material, use those study aids.

If there are learning objectives at the beginning of the chapter, use them; reading the learning objectives before you read the chapter will help you focus your reading on the points you need to know. Of course, if your instructor has given you a study guide, that's even more helpful. Use your study guide to help you pick out the testing points within the chapter. If your textbook highlights vocabulary words, study them; most of the time, vocabulary words are very important to know in order to understand key concepts, and many times, those vocabulary words may well *be* key concepts themselves.

When you're reading your assigned chapter, don't start by just reading it from beginning to end like you would read a novel. Textbooks aren't meant to be read that way. The best way to read a textbook is to skim it first; look at headings, bullet points, images and captions, and any callouts. Then go through the chapter again and pay particularly close attention to the first sentence of each paragraph. Finally, go through and do more in-depth reading of the text that covers the material you need to know (i.e. anything on your study guide or in the learning objectives). If you're a tactile or visual learner, taking notes on what you read can be particularly helpful. If you're an auditory learner, reading sections of the text aloud might help you reinforce what you're reading. If the chapter has review questions or exercises, you should do them; they're there to help you reinforce what you read.

Organization

Perhaps the most important part of studying effectively is being organized. Many students mistakenly think that organization is something that doesn't need to be a priority. This isn't really the case; if you're not organized, studying can quickly become laborious. It's hard to stay in the proper mindset to study when you have to spend fifteen minutes or more going through different binders and shuffling through assorted papers just to find the materials you need.

This applies not only to the physical materials, but also to files on your computer. Then you save a document, you should give it a clear name so that you will know exactly how to find it. When you make changes to a document, use the "Save" function; you should *never* use "Save As" unless you have some reason to create a separate copy (for instance, if you have the document saved on your computer but need a separate copy on a flash drive).

Notebooks and Binders

When you are getting organized for a class, having tidy notebooks and binders is one key to improving both your efficiency and your study mindset. Having to shuffle through a mountain of loose papers to find the materials you need can quickly kill your motivation to study.

There are many different ways you can efficiently organize your notebooks and binders, but the most important thing to consider when organizing is that you want to be able to find what you need *quickly*, without having to search through lots of papers and without the guessing game of, "Oh, it wasn't in that binder; maybe it's in this one." One way to do this is to have two separate notebooks for each class: one small binder for storing papers, and one spiral-bound notebook for taking notes. Label your binders and notebooks, and use different colors for different classes. Use a three-hole punch for class papers when possible, and when that's not possible, store loose papers in folders where you can easily find them.

Computer Files

For the modern student, keeping digital files organized is just as important as physical organization. With classes having ever-increasing online components, in some ways, digital organization is *more* important than physical organization, partly because digital files are much easier to lose.

Digital organization techniques can best be described with a list of dos and don'ts.

- Don't
 - Use the "Save As" function every time you save a document.
 - Save your files with nondescript names like "essay1."
 - Save all your files in one folder.
 - Rely on sorting by "date modified."
 - E-mail files to yourself.
- Do
 - Save your work frequently by using the "save" function.
 - In Word, click the disk symbol above the "File" tab.
 - You can also save by simply pressing Ctrl + S.
 - Give your files clear, descriptive names.
 - For example, "Argumentative Essay."
 - Save only one copy of each file instead of separate files for each draft.
 - Create a separate folder for each class you're taking.
 - If you're working on a class project that requires numerous files, create a descriptively-named subfolder in that class folder for the project.
 - Sort your files by folder and name, creating files with clarity so they are easy to find.
 - Save your files in places where they can be easily found and accessed both on and off campus.
 - You may want to consider purchasing a portable USB storage device (also known as a "Jump drive," "flash drive," and various other names).
 - If a flash drive is not an option, cloud storage can be accessed from any computer with an internet connection.
 - All Gmail accounts have cloud storage in the form of Google Drive, but there are many other free options such as Dropbox and Microsoft OneDrive.

Classroom Materials

Another very important part of being organized is making sure you have all of your classroom materials. One key mistake some students make is thinking they can get through a class with no textbooks. Unless your instructor has specifically told you that you won't need a textbook for the class, you should assume the textbook will be needed.

Chances are that your instructor will give you a syllabus on the first or second day of class, and that syllabus is often a key to being well organized. Most instructors include a basic list of needed materials in their syllabi, and that is a good way to know some of the basics. Studying is not just something you do outside of class;

being prepared for class is a key part of learning. If you are unprepared when you go to your class, you're not as well equipped to study the material.

For instance, if you go to class and have no textbook, you may not be able to follow along with the class – especially if the instructor has textbook exercises in the lesson plan. If you go to class without a notebook or writing implements like a pen or pencil, you can't take notes on a lecture, which means you're missing a vital element you may need to study later, even if you *think* you'll remember everything.

Time Management

Finally, another essential part of studying effectively is managing your time properly. In order to do that, you need to be aware of what you have to do for your various classes. If there is one key part of managing your time well, it is this: *do not procrastinate*. If you wait to do the things you need to do until you have very little time left to do them, you won't be able to concentrate fully on your work because you'll be busy watching the clock.

If you have a big essay assigned, start working on it the day it's assigned rather than waiting until the day before it's due. An essay needs time to be developed effectively; if you wait until right before the due date to even start, you won't be doing your best work. Similarly, if your math instructor announces a test and the concepts being tested, begin studying and working practice problems that same day instead of waiting until right before the day of the test.

The important thing about time management is that you have to *consciously* manage your time and not just expect study blocks to fall into place. If you set aside time to study, you're more likely to perform well. The best thing to do is schedule a specific period of time that is set aside for studying every day – even if you have no big assignments to work on. Use your study time every day, even if you don't do anything more than read your textbook and review your class notes.

If you are organized, you will be able to manage your time more efficiently because you will spend less time searching for things. All of these facets of studying – knowing how to use a textbook, being organized, and managing your time – work together. Ultimately, they will help you feel better about your academic experience, which in turn will help you find success as a student.

Further Reading

- "6 Time Management Tips for College Students" (Rasmussen College, 2014)
<https://www.rasmussen.edu/student-life/blogs/college-life/time-management-tips-college>
- "Effective Time Management and Organizational Skills" (Iowa State University, 2014)
<https://agonline.iastate.edu/effective-time-management-and-organizational-skills>