

MAKING THE GRADE

Writing and Study Skills



GOODBYE HIGH SCHOOL, HELLO COLLEGE

Welcome to college! How often have you heard that? You've probably also heard some other things, like "the college years are the best years of your life" and "this isn't high school." You hear, over and over, that this really is a time of transition for yourself. More than that, this is a time when many things for you will be different. While some of your friends, activities, interests, exercise routines, and eating habits will be the same, many of these will be different.

One of the main areas where differences occur is with your academics – how you prepare for class, how you perform in class, and more.

It is important to recognize the academic skills needed to succeed in college are quite different from those needed in high school:

- *In high school, your teacher monitors your progress by assigning work on a daily basis.* In college, however, you often have long-range, comprehensive assignments with little monitoring of progress by the instructor.
- *In high school, most of the academic work is covered in class, and assignments outside of class are minimal.* In college, some material may not be covered in class – as a student, you are expected to read several texts and journals, as well as conduct independent research outside of class. You're also required to write extensive reports and papers outside of class.
- *In high school, classroom activities may vary, but many classes in college are lecture-based, so strong listening and note-taking skills are necessary.*



Additionally, in college, the pace of the work is set by the instructor, and often determined by what content needs to be covered in the course, whereas in high school, the material is often covered at a slower pace, and determined by individual student needs (Vogel & Adelman, 1993).

- *It's also crucial to realize that in high school, parents, friends, teachers, counselors, and mentors often seek you out to provide academic and emotional support, but in college, you must be your own advocate and seek services and support for yourself.*

GOOD STUDY SKILLS

Having good study skills is an essential foundation to becoming a successful college student. These skills are essential for your academic success in college. This sounds so obvious, but just as the academic environment in college is quite different from that found in high school, your study habits will undoubtedly need to change. Many of your study habits will evolve over the course of being in college – you'll find out what works best for you, and what works best for what types of courses and what instructors.

It's vitally important for your academic success to have study skills that allow you to demonstrate your academic knowledge and understanding. Just as a test or exam is designed to demonstrate your mastery of the information covered or knowledge gained, your study skills help prepare you for classroom discussions, writing papers, and those tests and exams. Here are some ideas that may be helpful. What's important is to find your own rhythm, your own style. Try out various techniques and approaches.

Don't be afraid to try something new or different – what's important is that you find what works for you:

- *Take good notes during the class period.* It's not so important to record every word; but do be sure to make a note of what is on the board, as well as information that you hear repeated. Listen for themes, and write down areas where you may have a question.
- *Be sure to attend class.* If you are unable to attend, consider writing to or talking with the instructor to see what was missed. There's often a lot covered that isn't covered anywhere else. And, another person's notes just may not be very helpful to you.



- **Ask questions.** If there's something that you don't understand, whether during the class or after reviewing your notes, ask another classmate about their understanding of it, or ask the instructor. If there's something that's confusing, particularly when comparing the classroom lecture, class discussion and readings, ask about it.
- **Understand class material.** Review your notes after class and periodically to be sure that you understand the content. It's good to review the notes on a regular basis – use the time that you're traveling on a shuttle bus, or waiting for class to start, to do this.
- **Keep up-to-date with your readings.** If something is assigned to be read before the class, it's important that you do this.
- **Reflect.** Consider reflecting upon the readings as soon as you've finished. Write some notes to highlight what the important concepts are, as well as any key terms.
- **Find a good place to study.** Some people like their rooms, and other like a change of pace with a designated study location, such as a library, empty classroom, student union, or (weather permitting) an outdoor location.
- **Review.** Review your study habits to see what works for you, and what you need to change.
- **It's helpful to keep a perspective that college is designed to be challenging, and to help you learn some skills and ways of approaching reading, writing, and learning overall that will be helpful throughout your life.** While college is meant to be challenging, it's not meant to be overwhelming. Good organization and good study skills can make a big difference in your academic success. Similarly, good organization can make a difference in other areas of your life. These skills can make the difference between a smooth ride and a rocky one, ultimately affecting the quality of your overall college experience.

SINK OR SWIM-SURVIVING EXAMS

Even though taking exams only comprises a part of college learning, it is still an important part of making it through your program. Examinations and tests provide the instructor with an objective way of determining your grades. They also provide you with the opportunity to formally learn information, understand issues and concepts, and pull things together. It's important that you "learn how to learn," as that will serve you well



throughout your life. Exams thus serve the instructor and you very well, as they provide you with some feedback about how well you're learning the material. If you don't do very well on the exam, it may be because you didn't learn the material well, that you didn't study well, or that you didn't demonstrate what you learned through your test-taking abilities. Whatever it is, the test results become helpful "milestones" for you to review your own progress, and your own ways of learning information and concepts.

Remember the following points when preparing for and taking exams:

- ***Know what to expect.*** What kind of exam does your teacher give? Multiple choice? Short answer? True-False? Essay? Are old tests available for you to look at? What material will each exam cover? General principles? Relationship of concepts? Dates? Formulas? Specific facts?
- ***Review material regularly throughout the semester.*** Review all previous material at daily and weekly intervals. Review material just before class, and review and fill-in gaps in your notes right after class. Ask questions in class and as you study. Think of questions the instructor might ask on the exam. Understand how these questions are pertinent to the course material.
- ***Schedule a special review session prior to the exam.*** Schedule several hours a day for a week or two prior to the test for review. Divide the total material into smaller, more manageable sections. Review the most difficult subject matter first as well as immediately before the exam so it's fresh in your mind; it requires the most mental effort. Practice recalling aloud without looking at the material, and if possible, explain it to someone else.
- ***Study for main ideas.*** Learning main ideas first gives you a framework in which to understand supporting ideas and details. Pay attention to what has been emphasized by your professor in and out of class, including in-class notes and handouts, and the information in your text, such as repeated facts, headings, and sub-headings.
- ***Study as if the exam will be a short answer or essay.*** Prepare the material so that you understand it well and have good recall, not just sight recognition. This is important because exam questions may ask you to explain concepts or issues. Also, depending on how well you respond during an exam period, having a good understanding of the material will help you in responding to a question, such as with a true-false, multiple choice, or similar type of question.



- ***Be well rested.*** Don't stay up all night cramming, since learning diminishes with fatigue. You'll think more clearly if you're rested and will be better able to reason through and analyze answers you don't know.
- ***Stay relaxed.*** It's only a test. This doesn't mean to shrug off responsibility and wait until the last minute to study. Practice good study habits, do your best, and keep it up throughout the semester. If you don't do so well on one exam, ask your professor how you can compensate and find ways to better prepare for the next exam. Excessive anxiety will reduce your ability to think clearly. Stay away from stressed-out friends and classmates. Arrive early and use those few minutes to find a good seat and unwind. Avoid doing a lot of last minute review work in the classroom. It will most likely increase anxiety, especially if you see something you haven't previously reviewed well.

GOOD WRITING SKILLS

Writing is so important for each of us. In our computer-oriented and fast-paced culture, many students are not writing as much or as well as before. Some students have even said, "I don't need to know how to spell; that's what spell-check is for." Increasingly, college courses are emphasizing writing assignments of varying types; some are essays, some are brief reviews, and some are more detailed papers.

Several things are very important with writing:

- ***It's important that you do the research as the background to any writing.*** While you may not be writing a research paper, some background is very important. This may be part of your own personal instincts, about what you want to say, and being able to say it clearly and in a way that is convincing to the reader.
- ***As you do the research, it's important that you use reliable sources.*** The Internet has sources that are good, and sources that are not good at all. The library has numerous quality sources, and other sources can be identified using appropriate standards.
- ***When you write, it's important that you do the writing.*** When you cite references, do so appropriately; not only is it important to honor the original work of someone else, but it's important that you document this clearly. To do otherwise is considered plagiarism, which is a charge of academic dishonesty. Furthermore, it's important that you learn the skills of writing for use now as well as later.



- ***Know the format.*** Check with the instructor regarding any format that may be required or preferred; this has to do with the paper itself as well as with the references.
- ***Use an outline before and as you write the paper.*** This helps you organize your thinking and your writing, and will result in a paper that is much clearer.
- ***You learn good writing by reading good writing.*** Look at the types of resources that you wish to emulate with your writing, and see what worked for those authors. Seeing how others have done it helps assist you with your own writing.
- ***Allow plenty of time for the writing.*** Specifically, allow time for reviewing the paper and revising it. This means setting an earlier deadline than the due date for the paper; have it done several days before so you can review it for clarity and make revisions. However, if it's a major paper, have it done at least a week ahead of time, so that you can let it sit without looking at it for a few days – then review it and make revisions as needed. That makes for a much better paper.
- ***Finally, don't be afraid to ask.*** If you have any questions (whether on grammar, format, organization, or other writing task), ask for assistance; good resources are your instructor, an advisor, academic support center, or writing center.

After you've done some writing assignments, see what you've learned from the instructor's feedback, as well as what worked for you. Review these tips again, and incorporate your own writing style with the instructor's feedback, for a higher quality paper.

TIPS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

Overall, academic success in college can be a big adjustment. However, it's an important one, and one where your prior experience is helpful but not sufficient. It's important that you have some new insights for these new experiences, particularly the new blend of academic and non-academic activities in your life.

As a college student, though you're allowed to make mistakes as you acclimate yourself to a new environment, it's important to keep several key points in mind:



- ***Be realistic.*** When deciding on your course load, consider that it's often advised to study 2-3 hours outside of class for every 1 hour of class. If you take a 12-15 credit course load, that means 30-40 hours of studying per week. That's why it's called being a "Full-time Student!"
- ***Develop a study plan.*** Make studying a habit, like going to the gym or watching your favorite television show. Factor study time into your daily schedule. Use a calendar/planner to block out committed time (classes, eating, grooming, dressing, commuting, recreation, work, etc.). Identify blocks of time for studying and label them, "STUDY."
- ***Include breaks during your study time.*** Taking breaks helps keep you concentrating on the material at hand. Also, use time when walking to and from class to recall main points of a lecture.
- ***Be assertive.*** Learn to set limits with others. Make it a habit to politely say "no" to requests that are too time-demanding and not in your best interest.
- ***Stay organized.*** Clutter hinders concentration and you may begin to feel buried alive.
- ***Prioritize your activities.*** Spend most of your time doing the things that are most important to you. Recognize that to become academically successful, school must be important to you.
- ***Reward yourself.*** Make a list of rewards and use them when you complete difficult tasks. This will help you get motivated and makes dreaded jobs easier to deal with.
- ***Be good to your body.*** Never let yourself become too tired, hungry, stressed, or overwhelmed. Not taking care of your physical and mental health puts you at risk for seeking out unhealthy means of coping, such as using drugs or drinking alcohol.
- ***Don't be a perfectionist.*** Trying to be perfect creates stress and can lead to anxiety and depression. Accept set-backs and disappointments as a normal part of life, and avoid "all or nothing" thinking.
- ***Seek support when you need it.*** Don't wait too long to get the help you need, whether it's for academic or personal issues. Support can come from instructors, academic advisors, mental health counselors, or campus ministers. Even classmates can help you out with understanding course material or knowing your professor's



expectations. Utilize the support services programs and departments on campus and in your immediate community. In many cases, these services are free for students.

After reviewing all of these tips, it may appear that the transition to the academic life in college is a big job. While it can be overwhelming, it is designed to be a challenge, and to equip you with life skills appropriate for many years to come. These tips are not one-time suggestions; they are meant to help you learn and grow, and to do better in the initial weeks and months of your college experience. There's no magic answer, and no clear-cut way of being fully successful without some effort. What's helpful is to find out what works for you, and to build on that. And, if something doesn't work as well as you would like, try some of these tips for improvement. Also feel comfortable getting involved with a workshop, discussion, or other professional assistance so that you can demonstrate your own academic success.

Christina Benedi, M.A.
Counselor, Counseling Center

REFERENCES

Vogel, S.A., Adelman, P.B. (1993). *Success for College Students with Learning Disabilities*. New York: Springer-Verlag

