How to Study (i.e., Learning Stuff)

The goal, the purpose, of college is to learn stuff; you do that through studying. There are different kinds of learning, some involving understanding broad concepts and ideas, others knowing methods for solving specific kinds of problems (i.e., math), and then there is just memorizing facts, definitions, trivia. For each of these kinds of learning, there are specific ways to study; for instance, to learn how to solve math problems, the best method is just to work many of those problems until it sinks in, while to learn facts and definitions, using flash cards and quizzing yourself repeatedly makes the most sense. Learning concepts often involves reading multiple sources, then writing your own summaries or critiques to synthesize those ideas.

For many students the major problems associated with studying of any kind relate to: 1, getting motivated to study; 2, creating an environment conducive for study; and 3, finding a way to study “actively” (rather than passively). In order to really “learn” something, it is going to help to get these three factors sorted out and working to help rather than hinder your learning. Please understand that sitting in front of the tv with Simpsons re-runs on, your roommates chatting in the background, and flipping through your class notes is NOT really studying: in all likelihood, you aren’t learning anything, just wasting your time.

1. **Motivation**: this one is pretty personal, so you need to make yourself a narrative that fits you. Maybe you want a specific career; maybe you want to make a lot of money and buy a nice house and a fancy car; maybe, save the world or make it better; or maybe you just want make your parents proud and not waste their money. Sit down and write it out; make it make sense for you. Get this statement out and look at it when you get lazy or confused, and tell yourself: **this** is why I am doing this.

Even if you don’t have a real specific goal in college, I think one of the best reasons to be at a university is just the love of learning; learning anything. Learning how to learn, so you can learn better. The whole rest of your life you will need to learn new things, so you should get good at it. You’re going to take classes at the university that don’t relate to your stated goals—maybe English Lit isn’t going to make you a better engineer. But it is going to give you a new perspective on your life, on people or our history or on the “human condition”, and your brain is going to get bigger, sharper, better. And that is worth doing.

**Procrastination** is the enemy of your motivation; you want to study, but you can’t make yourself do it. You are going to have to “trick” your mind to get around this. Keep a calendar in front of you, with deadlines and test dates underlined in red; in the morning, look in the mirror and say to yourself, “My Lit paper is due in EIGHT DAYS”. Imagine how good it will feel to finish a task and do well on it, compared to how crappy you will feel if you DON’T do well. Then, **make** yourself sit down and just start—not finish, just start. Getting started is the key. A trick to try once you’ve gotten started is: set a timer for 25 minutes, focus on your study task until the timer goes off, then take a 5 minute “reward” break (eat/drink something, walk around, make a phone call, check Facebook)—then **go back and do that again**. You can add in the game: how long can I go without looking at the timer? (You win this game when the result is: **you never looked at the timer!**)
2. Your Study Environment: Effective learning is going to take most of your brain’s attention; the idea is to focus all your mental energy on the subject of your study. No distractions, mind wandering, people coming up and talking to you, phone calls, etc. Only by focusing are you going to maximize the amount you learn per unit time; at college, time is the key—there isn’t going to be enough of it, so you have to be efficient. Focused.

Try to find an environment where you can do this focusing. Ideally, this is your “special place” where there are no distractions, and nothing to temp you to be distracted. Obviously, it needs to be quiet, with room to spread out your stuff, and good light. Turn off your phone. Close out your Facebook tab. Make yourself do it.

Libraries are obviously good for all this. But look around campus and see if you can find other places where you can study between classes (you should ALWAYS do this; do not waste an hour between classes, USE it). Best of all is to make a place in your house or apartment: a big desk or table in a quiet room away from the tv, a desk lamp to focus your attention DOWN, a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door.

There is also your “mental” environment, which for some students is a much bigger challenge. Worrying about stuff is the enemy of focus; it can be a huge distraction from studying. These are the “problems” in your life, which can range from money to family to boy/girlfriends to drugs/alcohol to mental health issues that you aren’t even consciously aware of. You might be able to fight through/around your individual problems and be successful; sometimes the problems are big enough that you can’t, and you are going to have to solve or mitigate those problems in order to be able to study effectively. Get help; talk to people who might be able to help. Let your professor know you are struggling; they might be able to offer some advice. All campuses have counselling centers for students, do not be afraid to go see them. If you think you might have learning disabilities, get tested and figure out how to deal with that. Worst case, if you need to sit out a semester to untangle your life, that is preferable to tanking a whole semester’s worth of classes. In the end, as a 20-year-old person, even the best-case scenario is: you are going to have doubts, anxiety, insecurities. Tell yourself, “I am OK; I can do this!”

3. Actively learn: this idea is much-used and abused in education lately, referring mostly to classroom techniques to get students involved in the process (clickers, small groups, etc.) Here I mean active learning while studying outside the classroom. In terms of IN the classroom: the main advice is to GO TO CLASS, actively follow the lecture and take notes, and do not be afraid to ask questions when you want to talk.

Outside of class, I am considering “active” learning to be anything other than sitting motionlessly reading/staring at text. For some learning, passivity is what is required—when you read a book, that is pretty much “passive”. You can, however, read with a pen in your hand to underline and make notes in the margin, which increases your focus and involvement. “Highlighting” may also help, but many students indiscriminately highlight without evaluating the importance of what they are marking, and this is not very beneficial.

The main active learning technique in college today is small group study sessions, largely in person but sometimes on-line via chat rooms or message boards. In theory, these are very good learning aids. You get to ask questions about stuff you don’t understand, and (as importantly) you can explain concepts to
your classmates. This is how you figure out if you really know something—if you can teach it to somebody else. So get involved with this if you can; the obvious warning is, you have to stay on topic. If the session devolves into who’s having what party when, then your learning efficiency drops sharply.

The other way to get questions answered is to go see (less effectively: call or email) your professors and/or teaching assistants. They are the experts, the explainers, so ask them; they get paid to do this, so don’t feel bad about bothering them. I am always amazed how few students actually meet with me during a semester, whether out of fear, apathy, or confusion. Especially if the course is in your major field, you need to get the professor to know your name and what your career goals are—they are going to write you recommendation letters for jobs when you graduate!

I think writing things down (alternately: typing in a document) is a good way to memorize facts, definitions, terminology. Every new class has its own vocabulary, and you need to understand the words to get very far in it. So as you read or study, keep a notebook or tablet beside you, and write these things down. Even if you don’t keep this sheet, the writing itself will help cement these terms in your head—your hand and your head are linked, somehow, and you can exploit this. Make a set of flash cards and test yourself. To me one of the best ways to study for a test is: go thru your course materials, writing down the important stuff, especially lists, definitions, new terms, etc.

Talking is also good for learning concepts, relationships, explanations. You can do this in small study groups, or (this will sound weird)—go into the bathroom with your notes and talk to yourself in the mirror. Explain a difficult concept to yourself as clearly and succinctly as you can. Tell yourself a story about how an idea came about, the history of something, how x is related to y. While you’re in there, remind yourself about the reason you’re in college, why you’re doing this, and tell yourself: I can do this!

Everybody learns differently, so you should experiment and find methods that work for you. It is also true that people learn at different rates, so how much time this will take you for a given class will depend. Success in learning (i.e., your final grade in a course) is a function of your native ability to learn multiplied by the effort (time) you spend studying. You can learn anything, given enough time and effort. You need to figure out how much effort will be required of you for a given topic, and then: commit to it.

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