How to Be a Student

The Basics of Being a Student

- Prioritize your life: Doing well in school should be your top priority.
- Study: There is no substitute.
- Always attend class.
- Do all of the homework and assigned reading.
- Develop self-discipline.
- Manage your time.

Self-Discipline Made Easy

Human beings are creatures of habit. Therefore, form a habit of doing what you reason you should do. Is it not foolish for your behavior to contradict your own reasoning? And what could be more harmonious than finding yourself wanting to do what you know you should?

Train yourself so there is an immediate reaction-mechanism within you:

You reason that you should do something, and thus you do it.

Other people who seem to have less difficulty with self-discipline probably have simply had more practice at it, thereby making it less difficult; because, practice is what it takes.

Time Management

No matter how you slice it, there are only 24 hours in a day. Good time-management requires:

1. Not taking on more than you can handle.
2. Reasonably estimating the time required to perform each of the tasks at hand.
3. Actually doing what needs to be done.

Only you can do these things. A couple of thoughts, though, that may help spur you on:

- A minute now is as precious as a minute later. You can't put time back on the clock.
- If you're not ahead of schedule, then you're behind schedule. Because, if you try to remain right on schedule, then any mishap or misjudgment will cause you to fall behind—perhaps right at the deadline, when no recovery is possible.

Introspection

- Understand, and be honest with, yourself. All else follows from this.
- Be both athlete and coach: Keep one eye on what you are doing, and one eye on yourself.
- Take command of, and responsibility for, yourself.
- Face your insecurities head-on. Some common signs of insecurity: Asking a question to which you already know the answer; being artificially social with instructors or other students, when the real reason is to temporarily kill the pain.

Form a positive self-image: Those students who are first entering college will probably have doubts about how well they will do. Try to do well immediately to instill an expectation of continuing to do well. Settle for nothing less. Nevertheless, try not be restricted by your past performance and experiences, good or bad. Learn from the past, but don't be bound by it. Seek out your weaknesses and attack them. Be realistic about your limitations; but, don't let this lead to becoming satisfied with them.

adapted with permission from Jerome R. Breitenbach
Further Suggestions

- Unify and simplify your knowledge: A textbook presents the subject in a particular form, as does an instructor. By their very natures, however, textbooks and lectures tend to present subjects sequentially. Take the extra step of understanding the material in your terms, which may involve recognizing relationships that could not be conveniently expressed in the order presented in the text(s) and lectures.
- Remember, almost every logically consistent topic is simple at its foundation. Try to recognize the simple underlying relationships in the subject at hand; these are often left unstated by instructors and textbooks.
- Try to learn general principles and methods. Learning by examples (putting the new in terms of the familiar) can only take you so far.
- Learn as many methods of problem-solving as you can. This is especially helpful for exams, when time is of the essence.
- Ask yourself questions. Why didn't the instructor or text(s) do this or that? Explore your own ideas. Try to understand the course material in detail.
- It is often said that the best way to learn something is to teach it. Do you know the subject matter well enough to explain it clearly and completely to someone else?
- Learn by observing others. Notice what works for them and consider incorporating those methods into yourself. Ask yourself "Why didn't I think of that?", and try to develop the related ability.
- Attempt to be methodical, neat, legible, deliberate, precise, knowledgeable, and reliable on the one hand, and creative, spontaneous, imaginative, smart, clever, articulate, and flexible on the other. The first mentality thrives on order, and inherently tries to do well what it already knows how to do; the second mentality thrives on disorder, and inherently tries to expand upon its abilities. Adopt the best of these two mentalities. Remember, every tool is a potential crutch. The first mentality may rely too heavily on already-mastered skills; but, the second mentality may fail to carefully apply those same skills.
- Think about and question everything, even the statements appearing here (and, yourself!). But, realize that it is equally foolish to be different merely for the sake of being different, as it is to mindlessly conform to the norm.
- For maximum efficiency, have several projects going at once. Then, if you get tired, frustrated, or bored working on one item, you can easily move onto something else, thereby staying productive as well as giving pending problems a chance to work themselves out subconsciously.
- Anticipate. For example, you may need to ask the instructor about the present assignment, but he/she is only guaranteed to be available at certain times; therefore, you should look over the assignment early.
- Forget pulling "all-nighters". These merely amount to borrowing from tomorrow, at which time you will find yourself considerably less functional. All-nighters are really an indication of not having properly planned your activities.
- If possible, bring your textbook(s) to class.
- Take your lecture notes in pencil, since any modifications can then be made quickly and neatly.

Closing

Overall, there is one basic trait that distinguishes successful students from those that are not: **Successful students force themselves to understand.** They do not merely go through the motions of attending class, reading the text(s), and doing the homework, expecting these actions to necessarily suffice. Rather, they are continually asking, "Do I really understand what's going on here?" They ask this question of themselves honestly, applying an internal barometer formed from experience to detect the slightest lack of understanding, be it ignorance or confusion. And, if the answer is "No", then the situation is viewed as unacceptable, and more effort is the response.

adapted with permission from Jerome R. Breitenbach