

Study Skills

These are not 'comprehensive' instruction on how to study. Instead it is the information I have learned from 35+ years of teaching as a first generation professor.

1. The first day of class you will receive a course syllabus. It may be a printed hard copy or it may be available on a website. When you begin a new course, read the course syllabus and see if you understand what is expected.

There should be 'Course Objectives' that tell you what you are expected to learn. Not what will be taught, but what you should learn from what is taught.

Are you clear on whether the exams are comprehensive, that is, each exam covers all material covered so far, instead of just material since the last exam? Are you clear on how they will be graded? If not, ask. No one wants surprises later.

2. The professor will lecture and have a recommended or required textbook. Find out if the exams will be based primarily on the lectures, primarily on the textbook, or both.

Explanation - A textbook may contain all of the core information for the course or it may be considered a 'reference' text. What is a 'reference' text? It means it is a resource you can use to look up information if you do not understand a concept or want to know more.

Advice - If you have a study group, you may find other students who say "Oh, I think that's right." What you want is one member who one 'hard-nosed member' and says "Wait a minute. Let's look that up."

3. How to study - Prepare for class. Read the assignment in advance whether it is in the textbook, online, or a handout. Put a question mark next to everything that is NOT clear. After the lecture, see how many question marks you can erase, because the answer was in the lecture.

If your questions were not answered, go to the professor and get the answer right away. Do **NOT** wait until two days before the exam to get your questions answered.

Example: You read over the notes prior to the lecture (first exposure). Then you listen to the lecture (second exposure). Immediately after the lecture, you go to the professor and get your questions answered. Then you review your notes at the end of the week

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(third exposure). Now when it is three days before the exam, you have had three exposures, that is, you are not starting cold.

By time you take the exam, you are totally on top of the information. You go into the exam **KNOWING** you know the material. You go in psyched!

4. The textbook - Are you supposed to study all the pictures and figures. The pictures and figures are there to **ADD** to your understand. If you are looking at the figure, **READ** the figure legend. If you are studying for an exam later, cover the figure legend and see if you understand the figure. Is the point obvious?

5. If you have special learning needs, the college/university is going to have some type of disabilities center to address them. (At the University of Wisconsin-Madison it is the McBurney Center.) Get them addressed at the very **BEGINNING** of the semester. Do not gamble, wait, and 'see how you do'. By the time figure out you need assistance, you may have already struggled with the first exam. **DO NOT** wait. Using foresight to address your needs is a sign of **WISDOM**.

If you have learning needs that have not been officially 'diagnosed', go to the disabilities center and ask what you need to do have them addressed at the beginning of the semester.

Example: If you have problems seeing or hearing, talk to the professor and make arrangements to reserve a seat at the front of the classroom (and, of course, get your eyes checked). Also, if you have trouble getting all of the information down as the professor speaks, record the lecture. **Do NOT** wait until you have difficulty, because you will kick yourself. Go at the **BEGINNING** of the semester.

Example: I have had students who asked that they put their tape recorder on the podium. No problem.

Can't afford a tape recorder? Talk to the professor. Maybe the prof has Garage Band or someother recording software on her/his laptop and can record it for you.

6. There are **NO** rewards for going through college on you own. Your goal should not be to avoid professors. Instead go to them and get your money's worth. **Ask, ask, ask.** In high school you may have been rewarded for independence, but now it takes teamwork. Figure out the best way for you to approach a professor.

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Not everything that's on the Internet is true and not everything that is true is on the Internet. A whole bunch is in the head's of professors. **TALK TO PROFESSORS. TALK TO PROFESSORS. TALK TO PROFESSORS.**

If you are a bit on the shy side or are not comfortable approaching professors, try this warm up. After each lecture there is a cluster of students who go to the front of the lecture hall and talk to the professor. (They may be 'nerds', but then again they may just have their acts together taking 100% responsibility for their learning.)

Follow the others down there, stand on the edge of the group, and listen to the questions and answers. You will either confirm that you know the material (Yes!) or establish that you don't. If you are uncomfortable at first, wait for the others to leave and then ask your question. Or walk the professor to his/her office. In time you will be bold enough to ask questions in class.

7. Then make a point to see the professor during office hours. Professors write the exams. They even pass them! Also, professors tend to be 'leaky' right before exams. They wrote the exams. They know what's on them! They have the correct answers. So get in there and ask your questions. Plus . . . it will impress the professor that you are taking responsibility for your learning.

8. A 'Theresa rule' - **NEVER** ask a professor a 'Yes or No' question. 'Yes' or No' **ENDS** a conversation. Instead ask them a question in a manner that requires them to answer with a sentence. Get them talking and then keep them talking. (This is the 'profess' in professor. We love to talk!)

9. There is actually an art to asking a question. (Something I did not learn until my 40s !?)

Ask a specific question and you'll get a specific answer. If you ask a vague question, you get a vague answer. (Also, remember that professors hate hearing 'Do we have to know this?' and 'Will this be on the exam?' Wise up! Show an interest in the subject, rather than a need to just get a grade. Ask questions about the course material until you are certain how much detail will be covered.)

Example of what NOT to do

Student: Will the test be hard?

Professor: No. (You've learned nothing that will help you. Of course, the professor doesn't think the exam is hard. He/she wrote it!)

Example of what **TO** do

Student asks a broad, general question: What is the role of a mitochondria?

Professor: Professor discusses the role of mitochondria.

(The professor answers the question, so this is important information.)

Student asks a narrower, more specific question: How does a ribosome attach to the endoplasmic reticulum?

Professor: Professor discusses the role of the ribosome in channeling the newly synthesized protein into the lumen of the endoplasmic reticulum.

(The professor answers the questions again, so this is important information.)

Student: How many microfilaments are there in the average cell?

Professor: That is interesting, **HOWEVER**, that is more detail than you need to know. (When you are off track the professor will redirect you.)



10. Learn to distribute your study time wisely. Where did the professor place the emphasis? If two of ten lectures were on cell organelles, will 20% of the exam questions be on cell organelles as well? Ask her/him. Just be sure you do not spend 50% of your time on 10% of the material. (Of course, you adjust your time for what is easy or difficult for you, too.)

11. Choose your study partners wisely. Best friends are not always the best choice - not because you will goof off - but because you may tend to quickly validate each other's answers, rather than saying "Hey, wait a minute. Are you sure that's right? Let's look up the right answer." Look it up. Don't guess. Also, if you study with someone who has a better understanding of the material than you do, you will learn from them. And when you have a better understanding than they do, they will learn from you.

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12. If you skip class, it means you know you can learn more in that hour all by yourself than you do with the help of the professor. (P.S. Remember who writes the exams.) Your first exposure to the material should not be three days before the exam.

Example: I had a first year medical student who routinely skipped his 7:30 AM biochemistry class. I asked him if he studied from 7:30 - 8:30 AM. No, he slept in. So he was already behind.

18. There is NO SUCH THING as a stupid question. If you don't believe this is true, check out one of your large classes. One individual may ask a question, but **ALL** heads go down to record the answer. Perhaps others just didn't have the courage to speak up. But if you are taking responsibility for your education, **YOU** ask the question. It is a sign of wisdom!

19. Do not think it is best to copy someone else's study habits. What works best for her/him may not be what is best for you. You are unique! Find out what works best for you.

Example: I had a rare student many years ago that had a photographic memory. His best friend reasoned 'Kevin doesn't have to study, so I don't either.' And the second student was failing.

20. Do **NOT** use the first exam to see if you are studying correctly. This is one of the **MOST COMMON** problems students have.. Often times without even thinking about it, a student will go into an exam hoping they have studied correctly only to find out they have not. Instead go to the professor **BEFORE** the first exam to determine whether you are studying correctly. In this way you avoid the problem of having to recover from a bad grade on a first exam, while preparing for the second exam. You spiral up! Not down.

21. The best way to explain a 'C grade' is to avoid it. If you are competing with someone for a job, admission to graduate school, or admission to professional school, those **WITHOUT C grades** will have an advantage over those who do. Even if you have a load of good reasonings - personal illness, death in the family, injury. . . . Therefore, rather than explaining a 'C' on a transcript, it is best to **AVOID** it at the time you are taking the course. It is therefore necessary for you to read the syllabus, talk to the professor, and use all the tutorial help available **BEFORE** the exam. Only then can you say you gave it your best. Then you go forward without regret.

22. If your grade point average is not going up each semester, consider doing **LESS** better. Nine credits of A is better than 14 credits of C. It is a sign of wisdom to chose to do less **BETTER!**

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23. If you need to drop a course, do it early in the semester, so you can put the 'time saved' to better use in your other courses.

Example: You could struggle with three courses for an entire semester only to end up with a grade of C in each of them. However, if you were to have dropped one of those courses **EARLY** in the semester and applied that study time to the other two courses instead, you could achieve A and B grades in those classes.

24. Dropping a course does not mean you are dumb. It means you are **WISE!** It is a sign of maturity to be able to assess what is best along the way and modify your path as needed.

Believe in yourself! I do!