

Other Tips for Getting Good Grades

You want the world to know that you worked hard in college, so you want to earn stellar grades. A whole lot of ingredients go into wonderful grades, so here you'll find a bunch of tips for the academic side of college. That academic side is pretty important, after all.

1.) Keep your class materials organized so you can easily find your books, notes, and digital files.

* Even if there's no one hovering over you to keep you organized, tidiness is a reward in and of itself because you'll save time and never lose anything important.

- You don't need to organize everything perfectly, mind you. We all have a few messy piles somewhere. I'd just recommend having some rules in place to keep yourself in check.

* Make sure you use a planner of some sort to keep your readings, assignment due dates, test times, and more in line.

- Every day, my planner had a checklist of tasks I needed to accomplish, big or small. So, I never forgot an assignment.

- Don't rely solely on your memory: I promise it will betray you eventually, especially when you're super busy. So make careful planning in your planner a natural habit. When your workload builds up, you'll be grateful that you've practiced keeping all your tasks in order even when things were easier.

* Keep your materials organized by class. This is extremely important if you don't want to lose track of anything.

- A few classes will not have many papers, so they'll just need a folder. Others will require a binder. How big the binder needs to be can vary.

- I'd recommend keeping blank loose-leaf paper in every binder and folder. Even if you do most of your note-taking on a computer, you never know when you might have to jot something down and turn it in. Plus, technology sometimes betrays you, in case you haven't figured that out yet.

- I never used binder dividers for much, other than dividing things up by units. Just make sure the important stuff is near the front. This includes reference material you'll be looking at all semester, such as the syllabus.

- Arranging most of your materials by date is a great way to stay organized. I kept my notes in chronological order, and in a separate part of the binder or folder, I kept most of the handouts in chronological order.

- Whenever you start taking notes for the day, put the date on that line.

- Also, put your name and the date on all handouts.

* Although you could get by with it in high school, it's rather pathetic to ask a professor for an extra copy of some handout because you lost yours. Some will even refuse to give you another, in which case you'll need to use a copy machine on someone else's handout.

- Consider scanning your handouts, especially the important ones like the syllabus, so that they'll be backed up on your computer. This will give you another way to access them, and you can print them out again if necessary. If you're pretty organized, though, this might be overkill.

* You should bring one heck of a three-ring hole puncher to college with you. Make sure it can handle many pages at once. Share it with your roommate.

- Before punching holes into handouts, make sure you aren't punching right through anything important! You don't want to make holes right in the middle of words.

* On the front of every binder or folder, put the name of the class, your name, your cell phone number, and the professor's name followed by their office building and number.

- That way, if it's ever lost, someone will hopefully call you or give it to the professor.

- If you live on campus, consider putting your dorm's location on it too.

- Writing all this may seem time-consuming, but it should only take one extra minute. And if you ever do lose a binder or folder, you'll be grateful that you used that precious minute well.

* When you start using a textbook for a class, put that information from the above tip (your name, the professor's, etc.) on the inside cover in case you lose your book.

- Write directly in the textbook: a piece of taped paper can easily be removed by a thief.

- Also, pick a random page number that only you would remember. Squeeze your name and complete contact info there too. Use a pen. You see, some people steal books and then rip off the front cover to remove the real owner's name. If you think a fellow student has done this to you, you can prove it by flipping to that special page and showing how you've already written down a lot of your info there.

* Organize your digital materials carefully. My system worked fine for me, so maybe it will work well for you too.

- I gave each semester its own folder, such as "Semester 7 – Fall 2011." I kept a scanned copy of my schedule for each semester in its respective folder.

- I then had a folder for each class on my computer. Even if a few classes only had a couple documents, this helped me keep everything where it needed to be.

- Within the class folders I used most often, I had different folders like, "Required Readings," "Weekly Responses," "Analysis Project," "Group Project," and more.

- All my filenames were descriptive to make searching easy, whether I went through the stuff myself or used the computer's built-in search function.

- I never deleted anything, just in case it would come in handy in the future. Even after graduating, I've looked up some things in my school folder.

2.) Read every syllabus carefully so you know what to expect from every class.

* At the beginning of every semester, your professors will each give you a syllabus. This describes the scope of the course, gives you the professor's contact information, breaks down how you'll be graded, gives you a schedule of events, and more. Some professors stick to their schedules perfectly if there isn't a snow day or other disruption.

* Although professors will usually go over the syllabus on day one, re-read it on your own when the opportunity arises to make sure you didn't miss anything. Back in my day, I glanced at the syllabus every now and then to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything important.

* Do not panic when you first see the syllabus. Seriously, *don't panic!*

- At the beginning of each semester, every class seemed overwhelming to me because I was reading about *all* the work we would be doing in those four months. Receiving all that information at once can be stressful, especially for five different classes.

- Remember that four months is a long time, and you can take each assignment and test one step at a time.

- Be prepared for some huge assignments in different classes to be due at roughly the same time. You'll often see lots of term papers due the week before final exams. That's just how college is. This is a good reason to get an early start on at least a few major assignments. That way, you don't have to rush through five huge papers and projects during the last week of the semester.

* The professor expects that you've read and agreed to the syllabus by staying in their class. Therefore, you should know what the syllabus says.

- Make sure you don't ask the professor something that's already answered clearly on the syllabus.

- Don't bend any rules on the syllabus, like calling the professor's cell phone past a permitted hour. Ignorance of the law is no excuse.

- Also, if the syllabus has a policy on there you don't like (such as no leaving the room during class, attendance required, etc.), then don't expect complaining about it later will help.

* If the syllabus says anything that could be problematic for you, talk to your professor about it right away rather than wait until the heat of the moment.

- For instance, if a professor forbids students from leaving the room during class but you have an overactive bladder, then discuss it as soon as possible. Thank them for any accommodations they make.

- If there's something about the syllabus you don't understand, ask the professor about it. Many other people might have the same question, and it shows the professor you attentively read their syllabus.

* Sometimes, the professor will give directions and a due date for a long-term assignment right on the syllabus. They are not obligated to remind you when that due date is coming, so check the schedule on each syllabus regularly.

- Most professors will give reminders of upcoming due dates, but there's no guarantee they always will. One of my professors didn't remind us about a 10-page paper until a couple days before it was due! But she didn't feel guilty at all: it was on the syllabus. Besides, checking the due dates on every syllabus you receive shouldn't take that long.

- Calendar and reminder programs on computers, tablets, and smartphones can be helpful, but make sure you're keeping all that organized. Personally, good ol' planners are what I believe in.

- If the directions for an assignment on the syllabus are unclear, then be sure to ask your professor about it. You should never have to guess or assume what the project's requirements are.

3.) Do your assigned reading.

* I've heard a number of college graduates say that they would have learned so much more if they had done more of the reading. Since you're stuck at college for about half a decade no matter what you do, shouldn't you get some knowledge out of it?

* The professor's lectures won't cover everything in the textbooks, and the textbooks won't cover everything in the professor's lectures. Although there are some exceptions, it's important to take notes in class and read the material.

* Do not multitask while reading.

- This means no music, no TV, no hanging out somewhere loud, no checking your texts every couple of minutes, etc. You cannot let yourself get distracted if you plan on learning anything.
- Remember, it's better to spend an hour reading and learning than it is to spend an hour not really reading but not really having fun either. Don't dilly-dally.

* You buy your textbooks yourself at college, so you can often sell them used. For this reason, some students never make marks in their textbooks. I, for one, think that's a horrible idea.

- First off, no matter what condition your textbook is in, used ones don't sell for much because there are usually plenty to go around.
- Second, it's important to write, underline, and highlight your reading. It keeps you focused as you read and helps you study later.
- Your written notes off to the side of the text could contain things such as connections to other important material, questions (perhaps to ask the professor in class or during office hours later), and quick summaries of paragraphs you didn't understand at first—that way, you won't have to try to re-understand them later.
- But don't overdo it with the underlining/highlighting, or it will lose the ability to point out the most vital information. Remember that the main point of a paragraph is often at the beginning or end. Highlight anything that seems interesting or relevant: don't try to read your professor's mind by only highlighting material you think they'll put on an exam.

* When reading a textbook chapter in a class like history or science, begin by reading the conclusion of that chapter (if there is one). The conclusion sums up the main points, which will help you out as you do your reading.

- Also, don't abuse this advice, but if you haven't done the reading when class time comes, looking at the conclusion will at least give you some clue what's going on.

* As the semester moves along, you'll get a better feel for which classes have textbooks that are essential to learning the material and which classes have less valuable reading. Use that information to budget your time wisely.

- What you learn in every class is a mixture of the professor's lectures and the assigned reading. Depending on the class, the lectures might be the focus, or the reading might be the focus. Figuring this out can help you determine the best way to study for each class without overloading yourself.
- In some classes, skimming the text might be okay. In others, you'll need to read extremely carefully if you want a good grade.

4.) Participate in class, especially in your seminars.

* Many of my smaller classes had a participation score that would count toward my grade. A score like this is basically guaranteed in seminars, where discussion is the core of each class period.

- Answering the professor's questions in class or asking interesting questions yourself could boost your participation score.
- Skipping class, nodding off during it, or violating rules could lower your score.
- I saw some people at college who never said a word in class, even if 25% of their grade was based on participation! That terrible mistake slashed a few letters off their grades.
- Be sure to check the syllabus to see if participation is graded.

* Participation doesn't require any extra time on your part, so it's really the most efficient way to raise your grade. Besides, staying attentive in class should boost your grade in other ways as well.

- If you're having trouble understanding the material, then at least ask questions about it. Those questions will show that you're attentive, which will boost your participation grade, and the responses you receive should help you grasp the tough stuff, which will obviously boost your grade too.

- Your university's professors are supposed to teach you things, so go ahead and ask questions!

* Even if you can doodle and focus at the same time, make sure you look attentive, focused, and studious for your professor. Oh, and even if it's allowed, eating your lunch while looking studious isn't easy to pull off.

* Participating doesn't mean sucking up. Feel free to voice your opinions.

- If you disagree with something in the textbook, with something a fellow student said, or with something the professor said, then *politely* voice your concern. This will show the professor you're thinking carefully about the subject matter, and that's exactly what they want you to do.

- Just remember that some professors will only accept disagreement to a certain point. I once drove one ballistic by being a little too adamant about my views.

- You can tone down your assertions by hedging them with statements such as, "In my opinion," "Personally," "It could be argued that," and "It's also possible that."

- Absolutely never use personal attacks in classroom debate.

* Some of my classes had only one or two vocal people while the rest were silent. Don't let situations like this drag you down.

- Don't let the silence of your fellow students pressure you into lowering your grade, which is exactly what you're doing if you fail to participate in a class where it's required.

- In fact, the less other students participate, the more your professor will appreciate it when you speak up. They don't like awkward silences either!

- If you participate regularly, then other students might feel more comfortable participating too. That'll help everyone out.

* Just because you've given some wrong answers in class isn't a reason to give up. Everyone makes mistakes.

- In one class of mine, it seemed to take me over a month before I could dish out any good insights when I participated, but everything turned out okay as the semester progressed.

* Even if you're not graded on participation, you might as well get involved in class discussions. Talking about the material and asking questions about it will help you retain the information.

* Almost every class that discusses "worldly" issues will have a conservative blowhard or a liberal know-it-all who spits out their political views whenever possible. Don't try arguing with them much. There's no reason to get yourself frustrated over jerks who obviously won't listen to anyone else. Instead, just let them throw their hissy fits. If you know their views are horribly flawed, so will the other thinking people in the room.

- Don't view classrooms as opportunities to shove your political views down other people's throats. Instead, be willing to listen, and share your views with respect.

5.) Don't cheat.

* Plagiarism is arguably the most dangerous form of cheating.

- If you're not sure whether or not you've just plagiarized something, then you probably have.

- You may want to consider seeing if your college's website has its definition of plagiarism somewhere on it.

- If you're caught cheating, you're at the mercy of your professor. Remember, you might be forced to withdraw from that class, which will cost you tons of time and money. In extreme cases, you might even be kicked out of the university. At the very least, it'll be marked on your record that you're a plagiarist.

* Moral considerations aside, cheating on tests or other assignments isn't worth it. The benefit of doing better on one assignment outweighs the risk of what happens when you're caught.

- After all, plagiarists aren't the only cheaters who might be kicked out of a class or university.

- Besides, if you're honest, then you don't have to live in fear of getting caught.

* Do not give your professors or teaching assistants any reason to think that you might be cheating.

- During a big test or exam, make sure your phone is off (not just on silent), empty your pockets, and put everything you don't need for the test in your backpack. Zip it up for good measure.

- I'd say some pencils (backups are always good!) are all you need on your desk for most tests. A couple tissues might not hurt.

- On test day, it might even be a good idea to avoid wearing a hoody or anything else with many pockets. That's a bit much, I know, but if you're ever stuck with a paranoid instructor, it's worth keeping in mind.

6.) Do not wait to do your work at the last minute.

* Unfortunately, many students have the dangerous habit of waiting until the last minute to finish schoolwork, whether they need to study for an exam or complete a paper. Even though you can usually get by like this, procrastination is a terrible habit for many reasons, as I'll explain here.

* If you have computer troubles, that could cost you some serious time. And losing serious time at the last minute could screw you over.

- Hopefully you've been saving your work to your computer as well as to your flash drive or cloud drive. If not, then be prepared to redo some of your work on a library computer if yours is on the fritz.

- Make sure you know what hours your library is open.

- Also, remember that most college professors don't accept computer troubles as legit excuses for not having work completed.

* If you sleep terribly two nights in a row shortly before a huge exam or the day a paper's due, do you really think you can stay up late another night in a row to study or write—and do well?

- If you begin your work early, then you can make sure you're feeling well rested as you do it. This will allow you to do the work better *and* faster.

* Things like power outages, car troubles, dormitory fire alarms going off, and more can throw you off.

* If you put off long-term projects, you never know what complications in the work itself might come along.

- For instance, one part of the assignment may take longer than you expected. In fact, you should always bet on one part of a project being a bit longer or harder than you planned.

- Personally, I once had a Spanish project that made me discover just how difficult it was to find sources written *en español* about the artist I had chosen to research. I ended up having to visit multiple libraries, a task that obviously took a while—longer than I had expected.

- You're also in trouble if many due dates across various classes bunch together at one point, making your last-minute work even more rushed. This is an especially common problem near the end of a semester.

- But if you plan ahead by studying or working gradually, you'll be more prepared when trouble strikes.

* If you're working on a group project, it's completely inconsiderate to wait until the last minute to do your part. Whoever is putting everything together at the end will feel stressed as they wait for you to finish, and then they'll feel rushed as they perform the final steps. Don't be the person who drags your group down!

- Unfortunately, you'll probably be stuck in groups that have some procrastinators. Encourage them to do their part in a timely manner by explaining how doing so would relieve a lot of stress for you and the other group members.

* Procrastination will give you less time to revise your papers, which in turn will hurt your learning overall.

- Revision is the key to improving your writing and thinking skills because it makes you see your strengths and weaknesses more clearly.

- It encourages you to think critically about your work, asking how someone might disagree with your claims.

- Also, you're more likely to learn better grammar and style if you catch errors on your own rather than have a professor do it for you.

- And it's important to note that revision works best if you wait to look over a paper at least twenty-four hours after finishing the rough draft. Needless to say, that isn't possible if you're slamming a keyboard the night before an essay's due.

* You're more likely to retain information if you study it gradually rather than cram it into your head for a few hours.

- If you want to remember information and techniques for future classes or for your career, then you should probably make sure you're actually learning it. College costs a ton of time and money, so might as well get something out of it. That means you shouldn't cram, but rather turn regular study into a habit.

- In the long run, you'll probably save time with gradual study over the course of many days as opposed to tons of stressful studying all at once.

* If you have any questions while studying, writing, revising, or whatever, it's easier to get an answer (especially out of your professor) if you're not doing it at the last minute.

* When a due date rolls around, students often complain about how late they had to stay up working on a paper. Why make yourself miserable by doing something the night before it's due? It feels good to get plenty of sleep.

By staying organized, sticking to a plan, and participating in class, you can learn a whole lot more from your professors and your books. Stay on top of your work so you can get the most out of your time at college—and avoid unnecessary stress.

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