

Improving Your Study Methods

This “classroom exercise” advice will help you be more successful in your studies! Underlined words are on the vocabulary page. Also look at the discussion questions at the end.

I. How to Take Good Notes: The Five R’s

A. **Recording** – write down the main ideas and supporting facts

1. Use an outline format to show the difference between major and minor information
 - a. In your notes, indicate the material’s significance by using an outline form [e.g., (A,B,C) for main points, but (a,b,c) for supporting points]
 - b. Listen closely for your professor’s signal words that indicate major points (such as “this is important” or “be sure you understand this”)
 - c. Take lecture notes using only the left or right half of your page; leave the other side free for complementary notes on this topic from your textbook.
2. Strive to mentally participate in the flow of the lecture, don’t just passively listen
 - a. Develop a big picture view: don’t get distracted by isolated facts.
 - b. Concentrate on the overall point or theme of the lecture; how do sub-points support that theme?

B. **Reducing** – summarize the material in a simple form

1. Summarize using your own words instead of trying to copy the teacher’s words
2. Remember that notes are reminders, not a transcript or copy of the material.
 - a. Copy verbatim only definitions and other material that needs to be memorized.
 - b. Quickly write notes in brief phrases, not complete sentences.
 - c. Develop your own system of abbreviations for long words (e.g., medc=medicine, medl=medical)

C. **Revising** – look over and fix the material as soon as possible after recording it

1. Fix (revise) confusing fragments of information in your notes.
2. Clarify abbreviations; be sure you will still know what they mean a month from now.
3. Are there some connecting thoughts or facts missing? If so, find them!
4. Don’t be afraid to ask a classmate or your teacher for help.

D. **Reflecting** – think about what you’ve written down

1. Did you get the meat or substance of the lecture? Can you see the big picture?
2. Can you discover the flow of your professor’s ideas?
3. Do you see both general information, and particular supporting information?

E. **Reviewing** – review your notes the same day you took them, and also before the exam.

1. Involve more senses by reading your notes out loud.
2. Begin early when studying for exams; make time to review several times, not just one time.

II. Studying for Exams

A. Compile all of your source material (lecture notes, textbook notes, handouts, things you have found on the Internet, etc.), and separate it into topics before starting.

B. Begin studying early for the upcoming test; this requires planning.

1. Gauge starting time on the number of exams and conflicting assignments. (If you have more than one exam or assignment due on the same day, then decide which one you will start working on first, and begin early enough to get everything done.)
2. Start studying at least three to four days prior to your exam.
3. Take into account the time needed for extracurricular activities. (You need to do more than “just study”; be sure your schedule includes time to exercise, honor work or family commitments, and spend time with your friends.)

C. Be an efficient studier. (see section III below)

D. Concentrate primarily on lecture notes and secondarily on reading material. (Most teachers choose to lecture about the most important things in the textbooks, and design exams to find out if you understood what they considered to be most important.)

E. Keep your eyes on the big picture.

1. Integrate information from many sources in order to get a more complete understanding of the material.
2. Analyze each bit of information to determine its significance and role in the overall concept.

- F. Consult your professor if your notes or textbook are unclear.
- G. Study using the following suggested procedure: (1) carefully study your lecture notes; (2) with each section of notes, find supporting ideas in pertinent reading material (i.e., review and take notes from your books and handouts); (3) go over the notes once again in reverse order and be sure you can tie the whole concept together.

III. Being an Efficient Studier (Do the *most* in the *least* amount of time.)

- A. Study a subject no longer than two hours at one sitting.
- B. Take short breaks approximately every forty-five minutes (at least stand up and walk for a minute to get your blood moving)
- C. Stay focused and concentrate deeply while studying.
 - 1. Minimize interruptions (turn off your mobile phone) and background noise (don't be near an interesting movie or a friend's conversation).
 - 2. Set a goal to be accomplished before taking your next break (e.g., "get to page 121" or "finish question 2").
- D. Don't waste small amounts of time, use them to study. (Believe it or not, you can accomplish a lot in just ten minutes.)
 - 1. Read a section of a required book.
 - 2. Recite a list of things to memorize.
 - 3. Study a review sheet or review your notes.
 - 4. Discuss class-related topics with your classmates.

IV. How to Prepare for and Take an Exam

- A. Before the exam
 - 1. Exercise the night before, get plenty of sleep, and eat a good breakfast.
 - 2. Get up early, and spend some time looking at key notes to refresh your mind.
 - 3. Walk to class (walking gets your blood moving); arrive about 15 minutes before the test starts, and just relax while you wait.
 - 4. Do not study once you're inside the classroom; cramming will only create confusion for you in the test.
 - 5. Trust your preparation (say to yourself: "I've studied hard, so I'm ready for this"), but never be over-confident (over-confidence makes you careless).
- B. During the exam
 - 1. Quickly look over the test pages, looking for parts that will need more time (like essay questions); then go through the test carefully and methodically. Look at the back of test pages (if it is printed "double-sided" then you don't want to leave half of it blank!).
 - 2. If you truly don't have an answer for an item, skip over that questions (i.e., don't waste time thinking about what you don't know).
 - 3. Watch the clock to be sure you have time for every section. Many teachers do not allow mobile phones in the classroom, so wear a watch (don't plan to use the clock in your phone).
 - 4. Take a short "mental break" in your seat for a minute or two if you start to feel yourself panicking, but don't "look around the room" (lest teachers think you are cheating).
 - 5. Make an educated guess when you are not sure of the answer: e.g., eliminate choices that are clearly wrong, and then look for clues to show you the best remaining answer.
 - 6. If you have extra time, check your paper before turning it in; be sure you didn't leave anything blank, but don't change any answers unless you are sure you made a mistake (your first guess is normally best). Be sure your name and other essential information is on the paper.

V. Dealing with School Frustrations

- A. Consider the past unchangeable, and study to change the outcome of the future.
- B. Realize that you are never defeated until you accept defeat.
- C. Keep your studies moving forward. Review to prepare for the *next* test or course, and learn from your mistakes (especially in "skills courses" like a foreign language). But do not waste time thinking too much about what you have done wrong (like trying to prove that your answer wasn't really incorrect).

- D. Realize that the first grades of the semester will probably be the worst. Instead of being discouraged, remind yourself that you will do better next time, once you are used to the subject or professor.
- E. Put forth your *best* effort; after that, don't worry. If you truly do your best, you have nothing to be ashamed of, even if the results are disappointing.
- F. Religious people often find peace and strength through prayer (such as peace of mind before an exam, and the strength to forgive someone who hurt you). If you are looking for extra help, this might be a great place to look.
- G. No one is perfect, so forgive your friends and teachers, just as you want them to forgive your own mistakes. Remember that forgiveness is a great source of peace and harmony.

Sources: This information was adapted for students in Asia by Michael Krigline, M.A., in 2009, based on a handout given to new students at Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina. The original material listed this source: Harves, Gene. *Harves Guide to Successful Study Skills*. New York: New American Library, 1981.

Discussion:

- Without looking back, tell your partner the “five R’s” of good note-taking. Then try to summarize each “R” in your own words.
- Did anything on this handout surprise or encourage you? Tell your partner about it.
- Look at II.B.3. Tell your partner about your extracurricular activities. When and why do you do them?
- Look at II.D. This advice is true for American teachers. Is it true for Chinese teachers? If not, rewrite this section, and discuss any other sections that do not apply to Chinese teachers.
- Section III.C. says to concentrate while studying. Tell your partner about your favorite study environment. What is happening in the environment around you when you study?
- Ask your partner information questions about “preparing to take an exam”; be sure the answers are in section IV.
- Tell your partner about some of the frustrations you have dealt with as a student, and (if possible) how you have dealt with or solved them.
- Which piece of advice in section V do you find most helpful, and why? If you have time, orally translate parts of section V into Chinese, and see if your partner agrees with your translation.

Vocabulary:

*significance=importance

*to indicate: to show or point to

complementary: related to sth even though they are different

*passively: not actively; without being involved or interested (She listened *passively*, without thinking about what she heard.)

*the big picture: an overall, general view of things; a situation viewed from an outside, general perspective

reminders: things that help you remember (e.g., remember a major point, a date, an event, or a place)

*transcript: an exact word-for-word written copy of a speech, play, TV show script, etc.

verbatim: word-for-word without leaving anything out or changing anything (“The press printed verbatim his speech.”)

*abbreviation: (缩写, 缩略词): a short form of a word (*etc.* for *et cetera*), title (*Dr.* for *Doctor*), name (*NBA* for *National Basketball Association*), and so forth

to revise: to change sth in order to make it better or more accurate (in BrE, to *revise* can also mean “to study sth again” but Americans do not use it this way)

fragment: a piece; an incomplete part of sth

the meat of sth: the most important part or main idea (of a speech, book, movie, etc)

the flow of sth: a steady forward movement, especially in relation to the way ideas build on each other during a speech, lecture, book, etc.

particular: specific or carefully chosen

*to review: (AmE) to look again at something you have studied (British equivalent: *revise*)

senses: your five natural abilities to see, hear, feel, taste and/or smell

*to compile: to add together, or to put information together in one place

to gauge: to judge or measure carefully (a *gauge* is an instrument or device that shows a measurement, especially in relation to minimum or maximum, such as a fuel *gauge* in a car)

*prior to=before

*extracurricular: (adj, only before noun) additional activities, clubs, jobs, etc., that students do but that are not part of someone’s studies to integrate: combine in an effective way

*to analyze: to carefully examine, esp. in terms of something’s relationship with other things

procedure: method; the best way to do something

*pertinent=relevant; directly related

a sitting: one continuous amount of time (i.e., how long you sit without standing up)

interruptions: distractions; things that unexpectedly stop what you are doing

to recite: to say sth out loud from memory, or in order to memorize it (i.e., to know it so well that you can repeat it perfectly)

to cram (for a test): to quickly learn a lot of material so that you can use it on an exam (even though you will probably forget it soon after the exam)

confident: certain or sure (esp. about your ability to do sth or about the truth of sth that others are not sure about)

*methodically: in a step-by-step way

(leave it) blank: empty; without writing

*to skip sth/sb: to choose not to do something you should do, like attend a class, answer a test question, read an assignment, report for work, or eat a meal

*to panic (panicked, panicking): to react in a strange (not logical or appropriate) way because of fear (Notice the unusual spelling of past/continuous verb forms; “They *panicked* when they heard rumors, which caused a *panic* in the community.”)

*essential=necessary; extremely important

*frustrations: things beyond your control that cause you to feel irritated, upset, or frustrated [you feel *frustrated* when annoyed because you cannot change a situation, understand something you are supposed to do, lack control, etc. (students have given these translations: 憋屈, 惘然, 失意的, 气馁, 灰心, 沮丧, 失望)]

to put forth: (1. AmE) to give extra effort in order to accomplish sth; (2. formal) to give, suggest or produce sth