

**Study Strategies (Or, "How Can I Ace This Course"?) Hugh H. Riley, Ph.D.,
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So, you did great in high school without any real effort and you think that college is going to be an endless party, and that you'll get As and Bs in all of your courses without reading any textbooks or even having to attend class. If so, your high school experience didn't prepare you very well for the university environment because you will likely find it very challenging to do well in college. However, I have good news for you. If you will embrace the strategies that will get you a good grade in any course - and if you will also abandon the behaviors and attitudes that simply don't work - it is relatively easy to make an A or B in any college course. What are those strategies? I thought you would never ask:

The strategies that work are:

- Most importantly, understand that making an A in any class is not as hard as you think and that you are entirely capable of doing so. However, it's also not as easy as you would probably like. Remember that: it's not as hard as you think, but it's also not as easy as you may want.
- Give up trying to find a shortcut to doing well in class. There are no shortcuts.
- Treat school like a job and act like it's your career. Or if not your career, at least act like you are shooting for a promotion or a raise.
- Attend class. Why is this important? Can't you just read the book and get notes from a friend? No, not as well. Imagine yourself as a police detective trying to solve a crime. To do that, you need clues. To gather those clues, you need to canvass the area, interview potential witnesses, visit the crime scene, read the lab reports, and take part in the interrogation of potential suspects. You simply cannot do any of those jobs well if you are not personally involved.
- Read the syllabus (*otherwise, it's like playing a sport without knowing the rules*). You cannot win if you don't know how the game is played.
- Buy or create a date book and record the dates for every project and exam for every class into this date book. Refer to this date book often.
- Sit up front. Pay attention. Make eye contact with your professors to show them that you are listening, interested in the material, and that you are trying to learn. If you find yourself nodding off, stand up and move to the back of the room. Remain standing because it's really hard to sleep while standing. No professor enjoys teaching while their students are sleeping.
- Read the material before class. Reading the material before class is like preparing soil before planting seeds. If you prepare the soil before planting, more of the seeds will germinate. Not reading before class is just like throwing seeds on the ground. Very few will germinate. However, if you

read before class, you will better understand (*and remember*) the information presented during the lecture.

- If you can find some other good students who are *seriously* interested in acing the course, form a study group of 4 to 6 people for every difficult class. Meet weekly for an hour. During those meetings, don't just chat and waste time. Instead, make the meetings productive by assigning specific topics that one member of the group will teach to the others. It's an old but true adage: "*If you really want to learn something, teach it.*"
- If applicable, download and print the slides before class and add notes to them during class. However, don't use these slides and notes as a substitute for reading the text. Remember, there are no shortcuts. The slides for any course are simply an aid to your learning – nothing more. Useful and valuable, but they are not a substitute for the textbook. If your professor has not posted the slides (or even if she or he has) make your own. You'd be surprised at what you can find on the internet.
- Ask questions in class and volunteer to answer any questions that might be asked. Get over trying to look cool and/or invisible. Also, get over worrying about embarrassing yourself by giving a wrong answer. Everyone (*except God*) makes mistakes. Asking and attempting to answer questions in class is typically arousing and I have a secret to share with you. Arousal and memory are very highly and positively correlated. In other words, as one goes up, so does the other. The more aroused you are, the more you will remember.
- Engage in active reading (*rather than passive reading*) and find some way to make the information personally relevant and meaningful. (*Active reading is where you ask yourself questions as you read and then search for the answers to those questions as you read. Passive reading has occurred when you realize that you don't recall anything that you have just read.*)
- Meet every professor for every class. Be bold enough to walk into their office, introduce yourself, shake hands firmly, and let them get to know you. Most teachers like students and they want more interaction with their students. Besides, the more that they are personally invested in your future well ... the more they are personally invested in your future.
- Create an Excel spreadsheet that identifies the graded events for every class. On that spreadsheet, construct the formulas that reflect the grading criteria for each class (*e.g., lowest grade dropped, influence of extra credit, class participation, group projects, research papers, oral presentations, etc*). Record your grades as they occur into that spreadsheet and then explore the influence of the other ungraded events on your overall percent earned of the total possible points. From those explorations, set goals.
 - Note: I have constructed a basic (*general*) Excel spreadsheet that gives you an example (*a model, if you will*); and I always post that model for the courses I teach (*under Blackboard's Course Information section*). However, even if you're not in one of my classes, I am happy to help you construct a

more specific spreadsheet for your classes. If you want such assistance, just make an appointment with me and bring the syllabi for your classes.

- Remember that you are in college to work, which means studying, but also remember that play is just as important for adults as it is for children. In other words, don't study 24/7, but be motivated and focused when it is time to study. College should be fun, but you're not a kid anymore and the costs and stakes are high so it's time to start acting like an adult and assuming adult responsibilities and behaviors. *Children only play; adults both work and play.*
- Be a boxer. Boxers don't train to lose and they certainly don't like losing. So ... if they lose a fight that they should have won, they always go back and carefully analyze the fight to learn from their mistakes. How does this relate to students? Most professors don't have time to review their exams in class, which means that unless you go to their office to review your exam, you will never know: (1) if an error was made in the reporting of your score; (2) which questions you got right and wrong, which means that if the final exam is comprehensive, the professor could ask those same questions on the final exam and you'll likely miss them again; and (3) if there are any clues in those exams that might help your performance on the remaining exams (*for example, errors in your reasoning, patterns in the questions and/or answers, etc*).
- Realize that reading for comprehension is a very difficult skill to master, which means that you cannot really learn anything by reading it once. It's a simple fact - college is all about reading, and reading for comprehension takes lots of practice. If you don't believe that reading for comprehension is tough and something that separates people, then why is it a task on almost every intelligence and aptitude test?
 - You know, it's amazing. When we were kids, we had to do everything repetitively in order to learn, but when we get to college, we're suddenly capable of mastering very complicated material by reading it just once and while simultaneously watching television or listening to music. When in your entire life have you ever been able to master anything on the very first try and with just one attempt? So, when you are reading for comprehension, turn off your radio, IPOD, and television. Despite what you might think, you cannot tune out human language, which means that you cannot focus on comprehension and active reading (*your inner voice*) while simultaneously attending to external voices.
- Exploit all resources. These days, most textbooks are published with ancillary support material that you may have already paid for but may not be using. These ancillary materials may include online flash cards, puzzles, games, slides, videos, sample questions, chapter outlines, online tutorial help, etc. In addition, for many classes, many universities train, evaluate, and pay students to tutor other undergraduate students in SI (*supplemental instructor*) sessions, which are free to attend. Finally, if the textbook is used around the

country (*and most are*), then there are probably other online resources from other universities and professors, perhaps including practice tests.

- If you start having problems, ask for help.

The strategies that don't work:

- Skipping class.
- Having no clue about the course requirements, scheduling, rules, grading criteria, etc.
- Memorizing things without really trying to understand them.
- Having no clue about what is about to be discussed during lecture.
- Sitting in the back row (*you might as well just ask the professor for your D or F at the beginning of the semester*).
- Sleeping, daydreaming, text messaging, and/or surfing the web during class.
- Being apathetic about your grade. If you don't care about winning, you should probably learn to like losing.
- Failing to study each day, but preferring instead to cram all night the night before a test. Cognitive neuroscientists call this "*mass versus distributed practice*" and there's literally a ton of research on it. Regardless of whatever grade you might get by cramming, you would have done better, and with much less effort, if you had engaged in distributed practice instead.
- Distancing yourself (*physically, cognitively, and emotionally*) from the course material. If you like sitting in the back row, daydreaming, sleeping, or surfing the web while your professor is lecturing, or if you think the material is boring and has nothing to do with you or your world, it's going to be harder to learn and do well in a class. And oh yes, you just might find that it is also difficult to achieve your full potential.

Summing it up: If you wanted to sum up these tips in single and simple statement, it would be that you simply have to care. Why should you care? Well ... even if you aren't paying for your own education, there is still a lot of money involved and money is an important and powerful resource. Even more importantly, we're talking about your future and the future of our country, and if our country is to maintain its leadership position in the world, then we really need people who care. You wouldn't go into an expensive restaurant, order the highest priced meal on the menu, fail to eat it, and then charge the meal on a credit card, would you? Would you really pay interest on a meal that you never ate and never gained any benefit from? If not, then why would you buy textbooks that you don't read, sell them back to the bookstore for pennies on the dollar, take out loans for classes that you don't attend, and sleep through classes that you then fail? Does that make any sense at all?