

# HOW TO STUDY IN COLLEGE: WRITING NOTES, STUDYING TEXTBOOKS, AND TAKING TESTS

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This handout contains the basic outline of my course in study skills. The most important point is "Be prepared." Many students need help in gaining the basic skills in study techniques for success in college. Reasons may include: college is different from high school, you have been out for a few years, you never really learned how to study, or you are working and going to school too. Whatever the reason, don't be afraid to get help. Take a course in study skills or obtain a book which covers study techniques. The book I often use in my course is Pauk, "How to Study in College." The three sections of this handout correspond to the basic stages in the college experience: Writing lecture notes in class, studying textbooks at home, and taking tests in class.

## **WRITING CLASS NOTES**

**CLASSROOM LISTENING.** There are different types of classes (lecture, recitation, discussion, laboratory, seminar, independent study) and you need to prepare for each one differently. Since the basic experience for students is in the lecture format, we will concentrate on note taking in the lecture class. Before the class, you should prepare by reading the assignment, reviewing your notes, and anticipating the day's lecture material. Arrive early and choose a comfortable seat where you can concentrate on what the instructor says. Remember that your job is to obtain facts, so avoid distractions (other students, noises, windows). Think of classroom listening as an active, involving task that requires total concentration. If you are absent, make arrangements with another student in class (not the instructor) to get classroom notes and assignments.

**TAKING LECTURE NOTES.** Most students have one of two problems in taking notes: They either take too many notes and can't tell what is important, or they don't take enough and can't make sense out of them. How can you tell what is important? Instructors usually signal major points with several techniques: 1)They pause briefly just before and/or after an important idea which allows students to orient to the concept and gives them enough time to take notes on it. 2)Instructors often repeat important points so students can grasp the meaning. 3)Instructors often write key concepts and important words on the board (or in a handout). A good rule is that if an instructor takes time to write it out, put it in your notes. 4)Instructors often introduce major ideas with signal words (for example: in summary, steps of, effects of, importance of, causes of, differences, uses of, history of, purpose of). Whenever an instructor uses techniques such as these, it usually indicates a major idea in the lecture.

The Cornell 6-R Note Taking Procedure is often extremely useful in taking effective lecture notes: 1)RECORD -- write down the important facts in the

lecture. 2)REDUCE -- summarize the main ideas with key words or questions. 3)RECITE -- look at the reduced notes and try to recall information. 4)REFLECT -- think about the ideas contained in the notes, including applications, examples, and implications. 5)REVIEW -- go back over the notes, reciting and reflecting again. 6)RECAPITULATE -- briefly summarize the notes you have taken. Note taking is an active process, with only the first step done in class.

While a variety of options exist, experts suggest the 8 x 11 loose leaf notebook to take notes in. Pages are large enough for adding information later, and flexible enough to reorganize when necessary. One suggestion is to divide page with a vertical line 2 inches from left margin for reduce: record, and reflect/recapitulate at bottom of each page. When studying for a test, the reduced notes will contain the major ideas, then the examples you have thought of will be easily reviewed just before going into a test (which saves time while taking the test itself). There are a variety of lecture note styles (outline, phrase, sentence, vocabulary, drawings), and you need to use the one which will organize the information efficiently for you. Use stars, lines, circles, numbers, or any other method which will increase the use of your notes. Remember, if you don't have useful notes, you can't learn the necessary information from them for the test.

## **STUDYING TEXTBOOKS**

**PREPARATION AND READING SKILLS.** For effective study, you need to have some preparation. If possible, have a special place where you can do most of your studying. It should at least be a place without distractions (noise, people, things, food), so that you can concentrate on the task of studying. You need to be motivated, and if you really don't want to study, you might be better off waiting awhile or taking a break. Before you begin, make sure you have all the supplies you will need (textbooks, notebooks, paper, pen, dictionaries, handouts). Then study hard, so you can reward yourself with a break (now) and a good grade (later).

Reading is critical to effective studying. You should recognize the different purposes of reading. You skim to get a brief overview. You read fast to get the main ideas. You read to get main ideas and important details. And you read to evaluate, apply, and obtain answers to specific questions. Try to develop reading speeds appropriate to the task.

Most students read too slowly. There are some techniques to increase reading speed and comprehension. 1)Practice reading faster. Push yourself on easy, light material (such as newspapers or magazines). 2)Stop talking to yourself. Many people voice each word they read (a carry over from elementary school). 3)Use your eyes to read "thought

units". Increase your recognition span (number of words seen in one glance). 4)Read straight ahead (poor readers continually back-track). 5)Adjust your reading speed for the particular purpose you are doing. 6)Read enjoyable things to have fun while reading.

**THE SQ5R STUDY TECHNIQUE.** The best known study technique is probably SQ5R (originally called SQ3R). The steps include: 1)SURVEY -- always get the overall picture. When studying a chapter, glance at the contents outline, skim through the pages noting the major sections, and look over the chapter summary. 2)QUESTION -- as you are examining the chapter, ask yourself questions about the content. Questions force you to do active studying and to better prepare for tests. Some texts have study questions to use, but many times you will need to create your own. 3)READ --read for a purpose (to answer your own questions). Read carefully and completely (including tables and illustrations). Concentrate on getting the main ideas and the important details. Read by paragraph. 4)RECORD -- After reading a paragraph or section of text, underline key words or write 1 sentence summary. Write question in margin. 5)RECITE -- recitation is an important step. Try to recall the main ideas and important details. Can you answer your questions without use of the text? If you have any weak spots, here is the time to correct them. 6)REVIEW -- people easily forget what they learn if they do not review. Review shortly after first studying, and space your reviews out before the test. 7)REFLECT -- Organize the information, think of examples and applications.

#### **OUTLINING AND UNDERLINING TEXTBOOKS.**

After you have read a section of the chapter, take brief notes on it. Keep topics organized, and include the main ideas and important details you want to remember. Keep the textbook notes with the lecture notes on the same topic. Don't spend a lot of time writing out all the details in the text (keep the notes brief and organized). Ideal is 1 sentence summary for each paragraph or key concept.

Many students prefer to underline their textbooks. If you do, keep in mind you want to identify the main ideas and important details for later use. Use marks you recognize, and write key words in margins. It is best to use a pencil (which can be erased if you change your mind), and to keep underlining to a minimum (about 10 words per paragraph). Be careful not to overdo it, or you won't be able to tell what is important.

#### **TAKING TESTS**

**PREPARATION AND REVIEW.** The best way to prepare for a test is through daily review and self testing. After you take lecture notes and study the textbook, take time to review the material in context of the rest of the course. Make up your own test questions and write out the answers. Ask the instructor what type of test it will be, and if any samples of old exams are available. Be prepared for the test. Keep up to date on assignments. Schedule your time carefully so you won't have to cram just prior to the test. Keep a positive

attitude about tests and always do your best.

**TAKING EXAMINATIONS.** There are a couple of general rules for taking exams. Be prepared. Relax (anxiety usually hurts your performance). Get there early. Always do your own work. Don't rush to get through (and use any extra time to review your answers). Stay positive. Work carefully (many points are lost through carelessness). And do your best. If you have test anxiety, learn to relax and get help to deal with it.

The first general type of examination is the OBJECTIVE TEST (true-false, multiple-choice, completion, and matching). When you get the test, survey it to determine how many questions you need to answer in the given time (so you can pace yourself). Very carefully read and understand the directions. Ask questions of the instructor if necessary. Answer the easy questions first (this gives you confidence, and all questions are worth the same). Carefully read the entire question. Look for key words or qualifiers. (For example, if the questions says "all" and you can think of an exception, then it is false). Remember that multiple-choice questions are essentially groups of true-false questions. Keep the context of the course in mind while answering questions. If you don't know an answer (and if there is no penalty for guessing) guess. Look for the "best answer" rather than the only answer. If you finish early, go back over the test and carefully check your answers (first guesses are not always correct). Never leave a question unanswered. When you get your test returned, go over it and make sure you understand what you did wrong. Remember that objective tests are essentially "recognition" exams.

The second general type of examination is the ESSAY TEST (short-answer, definition- identification, and essay). Essay tests are based on "recall". As on objective tests, survey, read directions carefully, plan your time, and never leave a questions unanswered. On essay tests, carefully follow directions. An instructor usually uses specific words in writing the questions. Important words include: Compare, Define, Describe, Discuss, Explain, Review, Summarize, Trace. Each word requires a specific response and if you give the wrong response, you won't get full credit for the answers. Don't make assumptions about what the instructor thinks you know. Always use correct grammar and neat handwriting. Handwriting is very important in effective communication. Take a little extra time to carefully organize your answer. Give examples whenever possible to demonstrate that you understand the concept. If you get done early, go back and review your answers. If possible, leave some space for possible additions later. If you run out of time, outline your answer. When you get your test back, make sure you understand why you received the particular score. Remember that performance on a test is a measure of what you have learned. Use the feedback to improve learning in the future. And good luck as you apply these principles to your studying!