

21 Study Tips: Learn the Strategies that Set Top Students Apart

by Winston Sieck - January 27, 2016

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It's annoying, isn't it?

You see them in every class. The students who seem to breeze on through.

Coolly killing one test after another.

How do they do it?

Is it something you can master?

Yep, it is. You see, scientists have been snooping on these top students for decades.

It's not magic. Students who get good grades simply use essential [study skills and strategies](#).

One study found that a key set of learning strategies explained 90% of the variance in high-school GPA. And 48% in standardized test scores.

Professor Barry Zimmerman of CUNY and Anastasia Kitsantas of George Mason University published [their results on academic achievement](#) in Contemporary Educational Psychology.

So, what exactly do those top students do?

Those who've really mastered the art of learning?

Zimmerman and his colleagues have chased those questions for over 30 years.

In a 1986 study, they found that high-achieving students used 13 learning strategies more frequently than lower-achieving students. The secrets of these master students were exposed.

A few years later, Professor Paul Pintrich and his team introduced the [Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire](#).

It built on the earlier work, and revealed a few more critical study strategies. And it was the main measuring stick used in the Zimmerman and Kitsantas study.

For this post, I've combed back through the research to illuminate the tactics, procedures and mindsets for studying that set these high-achievers apart.

Here are 21 study tips liberated from these master students to help you get more out of your studies and

boost your grades.

Study Tips 1: Focus on mastery

Learning matters.

It doesn't end with High School or College. You will be doing it for your whole life.

In a quickly changing world, learning is survival. The better you get at learning new things, the more powerful you become.

For each class you take, try to grasp the material as deeply as possible. Push yourself to learn new topics, even if they seem really tough at first.

Aim to [become a better learner](#) than you are right now.

Study Tips 2: Find the value for you

It's common to complain that we don't learn anything useful or relevant in school. That the subject matter is just not important.

Sure, it'd be nice if teachers did more to point out the applications of the topics they cover. Yet, it's also easy to dismiss anything they do say, as not relevant to you.

The best students start with the idea that there is some value, and then try to figure out what it is.

You can brainstorm, or search the web for phrases like: What's an application of X? How does X get used? Answer for yourself: How is this relevant to my life?

Study Tips 3: Take charge of your learning

It's rough.

School can make you feel like you have zero control.

Of course, you'll gain more say in what you study as you advance levels. You can also start taking charge now by controlling how you learn.

Use the teacher's lesson plan and assignments as a starting point. A guide to what you need to know. Then set your own agenda to get it down.

Taking control of your learning is the start to ruling your world. Own it.

Study Tips 4: Build your competence and gain confidence

Do you believe you can get straight A's? Do you think you can master any subject?

Believing in your ability really helps you push in and learn something new.

Your confidence may inflate easily if you often hear how smart you are. But that confidence is unstable. Easily lost.

To get lasting confidence, you have to show yourself that you can.

So, pick one thing. Learn it deeply. See how you do. Rinse and repeat. Over time, you'll see that you really can learn any new thing.

Study Tips 5: Think critically about what you're learning

Do you feel like you're supposed to swallow all that your teachers tell you in one big gulp? And then regurgitate for the test?

Well, you don't have to consume your courses that way.

You can approach learning like a master chef. [Slice and dice the ideas](#). Chew them up in little bits. Taste the flavors and decide if they agree with your palette. Think of a dish that you might create.

Too obscure? Oops. How about...

Question the ideas. Scrutinize them. Consider other possibilities. See if you find the notions convincing. Build your own ideas off of the material presented.

Study Tips 6: Frame it your way

Imagine reading back over your notes. They're a complete mess. Your chicken-scratches don't help, sure. But there's a bigger problem.

The ideas don't really seem to flow in a way that makes sense to you.

Guess what?

That's ok. There's not really one best way to present ideas for everyone, because our minds are all different. But, you can reorganize the ideas your way.

Rearrange the ideas. Represent them in a manner that clicks for you.

Pull out the major points and make an outline. Put them in a table. Draw a diagram. [Create a concept map](#). Make them yours.

Study Tips 7: Use grades to keep on track with learning

There's no denying. It feels good to get a high grade. And it's fun to show your family and friends.

Grades are also a sign of how well you are learning the material. Use them to gauge how effectively you are studying.

Getting a low grade? Don't quit. And don't get mad at the teacher. Change how you study for your class. Look at your new scores to see how that's working. No improvement? Never give up. Try something else. And when you do see them move up - celebrate!

Study Tips 8: Rehearse and remember

Imagine you got the lead in your school play. How would you get your lines down?

You'd rehearse! You'd practice saying them. Several times, without looking.

Treat your tests the same way. It's a little more private (unless you have orals), but you're still going on stage.

Get the ideas clear from your notes and readings. These are your lines. Use topic headings or key words as your "stage cues." And [rehearse](#). No matter what format the test.

Study Tips 9: Pull your scattered ideas together

You took notes in class. You read the textbook. You did the homework. But the ideas are scattered about your mind like an unsolved jigsaw.

It feels like you're missing a key piece of the puzzle.

Don't worry. This is totally normal. You need to take another step in your studying, and it's pretty simple.

Compare the main ideas from the different sources. Look for the connections between the notes and the book. Ask yourself how they relate. Put the pieces together and solve the puzzle.

Study Tips 10: Follow the clues to recover lost memories

You've studied well.

You're doing pretty well on this quiz. But you can't remember the answer to #3. You know you knew it. It's on the tip of your tongue, but you can't pry it out.

What do you do?

Don't cry (or pry). There's a simple trick that can help to find that elusive memory.

Think of what else you know about the topic. Or visualize yourself back in your study place. Follow these related memories as clues to track your target and flush it out.

Study Tips 11: Work out the learning goals

The best students don't blindly follow teachers' assignments. They take a moment and look them over to grasp the intent.

Think about what you are supposed to be learning. Determine the objective. And don't just rely on the teacher. Set your own goals for studying: What will you accomplish?

Then, make it happen.

Study Tips 12: Check your work. Check that you understand.

Your teachers use quizzes and tests to check on your progress. But you don't want to find out at the same time as the teacher. Better to know sooner, so you have time to correct.

Check for yourself first.

Figure out what stuff you don't quite grasp before the test. And check your work for accuracy (again) before you turn it in.

Study Tips 13: Be the tortoise

In that old fable, the tortoise wins the race by taking it slow and steady. Yet, many students act a lot more like the hare. Lounging, sleeping, standing still. Then a short burst of studying right before the test.

Go like the tortoise. Manage your time. Work steady. Keep up with your homework. Review periodically. Get into a regular rhythm and ease your stress.

Study Tips 14: Find your space

You've heard it a million times, haven't you?

Find a quiet place to study with few distractions. Turn off the headphones, shut down the video, and disconnect from social.

Multitasking doesn't work. Even for millennials - despite what you may have heard or want to believe. (Hey, just the messenger - don't kill).

Get into your space. Focus on one task. You'll get more done sooner, and feel better about what you're doing.

Study Tips 15: Keep going

Picture this: Your school is crushed by a giant foot. And the new place is amazing.

All of your schoolwork is fascinating. It covers exactly what you love. It's challenging enough to keep

your interest, but not so tough you want to quit. It's absolutely perfect for you. You can't get enough.

Now wake up! Sorry, dream's over.

Good teachers try to craft juicy lessons you love, and hopefully you get some sweet moments. You've also got to struggle through the bland and boring parts, the tough parts, as well as the times when you just feel lazy no matter what.

Persist – it's part of life.

Study Tips 16: Work with a friend

Not the friends who waste a ton of time yak, yak, yakking off topic.

We learn a lot when we talk to others. Explain the lesson to a struggling classmate who needs help. Get a group to chat about the topic, or muscle through homework together. Make up questions and test each other.

Keep it real. Keep it fun.

Study Tips 17: Stuck? Need help? Reach out.

Do you like to get your work done by yourself?

Your independent spirit is commendable. But when you're really stuck, push out to talk to your teacher or classmates.

Don't struggle by yourself indefinitely, and don't give up.

Get some help. Figure it out. Move on.

Study Tips 18: Ask questions. Seek answers.

You learn what the teachers tell you. Sure.

But here's a secret - they don't tell you everything. Look closely, and you'll begin to see the gaps. Cracks at the seams of what you're shown. Like Neo in the Matrix.

They're there. Stretch yourself to spot them, then [turn them into questions](#). Your questions.

Now, seek answers, and build your understanding.

Study Tips 19: Keep your nerves in check

Does your heart start pounding when it's time for the test?

It happens to us all. And it's actually ok – totally normal, to an extent. To keep your nerves in check, take a few deep breaths.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Relax. Then start.

Now, if you get deeply anxious - feeling severely queasy and your mind completely shuts down, then check in with your school counselor. Get some help.

Study Tips 20: Harness your wandering mind

Do you find your thoughts dashing off in different directions?

That's actually great. Your [wandering mind](#) can find creative new ideas. Make far off connections.

When you notice your mind wandering while you're reading, pause and let it take its course. See where it leads you. Then bring it back to your studies. You may want to take a short walk. Move around a bit.

Not so easy in class, is it?

When you're listening to a lecture or chatting with another person, find a way to put a leash on that wandering mind. Think of a question to ask to steer your mind back to the speaker.

Study Tips 21: Tangle with confusion

It's natural to feel confused sometimes. So what do you do with a perplexing lesson?

You go back and try to make sense of it, right?

Pretty simple, when you think about it. But too often we submit and endure the muddle.

Except the master students. They don't give in to confusion. They wrestle the ideas until they unravel the puzzle. Gaining clarity and making their minds stronger.

Mastering the fine art of learning

Your job as a student is not simply to follow teachers' directions.

Your head is not an empty jug that another can fill with knowledge.

A teacher starts you on a path. To have a good journey, you need to stand up and walk it by yourself.

You need to learn to control your own learning. Grapple with tough ideas and get them down. Build up your power to learn any new thing.

So you're ready to learn whatever you want. Whatever you need. Even when it seems formidable.

Master school. Master your studies. Master your life.

Rule your world.

Image Credit: [JD Hancock](#)

Pintrich, P., Smith, D., Garcia, T., & McKeachie, W. (1993). Reliability and predictive validity of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 53 (3), 801-813 DOI: [10.1177/0013164493053003024](https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164493053003024)

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