

IMPROVING ACADEMIC SUCCESS

STANDARDS

Standard 1: Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that contribute to effective learning in school and across the lifespan.

MATERIALS

- ♦ Handout A-08: Guide to Success

ACTIVITY

Introduce the topic of academic success and the need for improved study skills at the high school level. If working with freshmen, cite changes in the rigor of curricula, the increased number of distractions, and the increased importance of good grades. Emphasize that high school course material and assignments are more rigorous and challenging, that there are many more distractions, and that grades are connected to “credits” and credits are necessary to graduate. If working with older students, emphasize that these skills are useful in high school and college. Learning is a set of processes and skills.

Distribute a copy of Handout A-08 to each of the students and discuss the information on it with the class. Encourage student feedback regarding the items. They may or not agree with the strategy effectiveness.

Ask the students to add to the list of strategies. What techniques do you use to be successful? Summarize by asking the students to identify the “top five” strategies.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

This activity is suggested for use with freshmen or with older students who are struggling academically. The handout may be useful to distribute to parents at an orientation or may be added to a parent newsletter.

ESTIMATED TIME

1 class period

GUIDE TO SUCCESS

Textbooks

Before you just start reading a textbook or one of its chapters, preview it.

- Look at the illustrations (yes, look at the pictures) or figures and read the captions.
- Check out any bold or differently colored words in the chapter. They usually highlight key concepts or maybe vocabulary words.
- Start by reading the first and last chapters.
- Briefly read vocabulary lists or chapter objectives and summaries if present. These will help you get a general sense of the chapter and allow you to briefly organize the points of the chapter.
- First, just skim the entire chapter, looking for key points, phrases, and headings to “set” the chapter content in your brain. Then go back (yes, you knew this part was coming) and read the chapter or assignment at your natural reading pace).

These strategies will improve your understanding and retention of material. It may seem like more than you are already doing, but try it for a month, just one month, and see if you don't begin doing better with textbooks.

Lecture Notes

No one writes down everything a teacher says. You can't write that fast. Besides, not everything a teacher says is worth writing down, right? The trick to note taking is to listen carefully and filter what is worth writing down. What is the overall point? Don't start writing too soon: Wait for it. Then, when you get what it is that they are saying or conveying, write it down in your own words.

If you don't understand the point being made, ask a question. Get clarification. Don't believe for one minute that you are the only one who doesn't get it. That is almost never the case. If you don't get it, then someone or everyone else doesn't get too. They are often just afraid (maybe like you) to ask because they might look bad. What looks bad is when you don't get it, not when you ask about it.

Review your notes at night. The best time for this is each night. If you do it each night it won't take long at all. You are just filling in the blanks and making sure that your notes make sense. Notes that don't make sense are not study notes, they are bad art!

Study Tips

Study a little bit every night and keep up with your reading and assignments. Cramming doesn't work very well for most people and it is very stressful. If you set aside a real study time each day, you will find that you do not need to spend so many hours at it.

Where you study is important. It should have good light, comfortable, and mostly free of distractions. TVs and stereos usually just require your brain to keep shifting gears (reading but also listening to lyrics or actors' lines). It is not that distractions prevent you from studying or learning, it is that they make your brain work harder by dividing its attention.

Exercise and good diet help your brain and your motivation to learn. A high protein, low sugar breakfast will set the stage for a good energy level throughout the day. Try (I know that this is a hard one) to think of your study time as a positive experience, a learning time. You will likely spend your lifetime learning in one way or another. Studying and learning don't have to be unpleasant; it is how you look at it.

Form study groups if you like being with other people and it suits the way you study. If you are struggling in an area, get a tutor. They really can help and you won't need one forever. It is just a fix. You only go to a physician when you need one.

Test Preparation

Number one—keep up with reading and assignments. If you get behind, you will spend your time catching up, not really preparing for a test.

If you can attend review sessions, do it. Review is essential. It is why you should study each night a little bit, it's review. Ask about the type of test and the type of test questions. Is it going to be multiple-choice, true-false, essay, or what?

Most teachers want you to know the major concepts and ideas, so study those first and most. Learn vocabulary words if appropriate and look over chapter summaries and questions. They often work like a pre-test.

Test Time

Here's the deal. If you haven't studied for the test, then you can panic: I mean why wouldn't you? However, if you have studied, then you know what you are going to know for the test and that isn't going to change as the test draws near so give up the whole panic thing. At this point it will only get in the way. Worrying or panicking about the test can be helpful a week ahead of the test, but once the test begins, worry and panic will likely only result in you doing worse—panic during the test is “disabling,” don't do it. It won't help. Be confident that as the test is being handed out that you know whatever you know at that time and that's it.

Okay, now that it is in front of you, a few tips that may help are listed below:

- Look over the whole test, it may give you chance to get rid of a few last-minute butterflies and you can see what's coming.
- Budget your time—if you get bogged down on the questions you can't answer correctly, you leave yourself less time for the questions you can answer—make sense?
- Look for clues to some questions in other questions—this often works
- Absolutely, use the process of elimination for matching and multiple choice questions.
- On true-false or multiple-choice questions, eliminate answers with “all, always, never, or none.” These answers are almost always incorrect.
- For essay questions, think before you write. Make a brief outline on scratch paper of what you are going to write. It will organize your thoughts and your response.