

# **How to Ace Your Way Through College—and Still Have a Life!**

101 Insider Secrets  
to Getting Good Grades  
for the "Non-Geek"

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## CHAPTER 5

**How to Study Smarter, Not Harder**

Here's an important point to keep in mind: In college, students are graded on how well they perform on tests and assignments—in effect, they're graded on *results*. When grading your tests, your professors don't care how much time you spent studying. They aren't going to give you “extra credit” for studying longer than another person. All that matters is the result.

When I was in school, there were a lot of students who studied harder and longer than I did who didn't produce results. Why? Because it's not *how long* you study in college but *how* you study that matters. The key is studying smarter, not harder. I encourage you, I *beg* you, to focus on *results* when studying. Here's what I suggest...

## 26 Schedule Studying into Your Calendar

New York University psychology professor Dr. Peter M. Gollwitzer has shown that you're up to *seven times* more likely to follow through with an intention if you make an actual “appointment” to do it. For instance, if you intend to study for two hours tonight, you can greatly increase your chances of following through if you schedule it like you would a doctor's appointment—if you write down exactly *when* and *where* you intend to study.

So, don't just say to yourself that you're going to study tonight for a few hours. Instead, you might write down, in your day planner, that you will study from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. in a back cubicle at the University Library.

## 27 “Go to Work”

Several surveys have shown that 80 percent of the average college student’s studying is done in his or her room. This is a huge mistake. Think of people who try to “work from home” for a living. Oftentimes, it just doesn’t, well... *work*. It’s too easy to get distracted. Instead of working, many people will find something else to do, like watch TV, eat, read the newspaper, surf the Internet, play with the dog. In order to be productive, people in the “professional world” often need to get out of the house and go to an office. The same goes for students. Trying to study in your room just isn’t a good idea. You aren’t nearly as effective as you could be, especially if you have an annoying roommate who’s a constant distraction. Get away from the distractions and go to a place where you can *focus*, such as a library or study hall. Think of studying as “going to work.”

## 28 Don’t Study for More Than Two Hours at a Time

Prolonged periods of study are almost as bad as not studying at all. If you try to remember *everything* in one drawn-out study marathon, you’ll wind up remembering *nothing*. Your brain can only stand about two hours of studying at a time—after that, it just shuts down from information overload. Time spent studying beyond that is just time wasted. Try to study for no more than a couple hours at a time, **broken up into half-hour spurts**. Bring a watch or timer and set it to go off in 30 minutes. Study intently for a half-hour, then break for five minutes—getting up to stretch, shake off the cobwebs and reflect on what you just learned before hitting it again for another 30.

## 29 Use Flashcards

If I had to develop a list of just a few “top-shelf secrets” to academic success in college, the use of flashcards would undoubtedly be included. Flashcards enable you to memorize massive amounts of information—formulas, equations, definitions, dates, names, etc.—quickly and conveniently. Studies show short, frequent review of flashcards are up to **three times** more effective at helping you remember important information than long sessions of cramming.

Many students are reluctant to use flashcards because “they take too long to make.” However, what they fail to realize is the process of actually creating the cards—of writing down the material—in and of itself is a valuable study technique. It greatly enhances the learning process.

For best learning and retention, I recommend the following...

- Use 3x5 ruled note cards and write down *everything* you may need to remember for a test—names, dates, facts, figures, etc. As mentioned, I got best results when I prepared my flashcards in the form of “trivia cards.” For instance, if there were an upcoming test about vitamins and minerals and their functions, on the ruled side of one card, I might write, “This fat-soluble vitamin plays a crucial role in the process of blood coagulation.” Then on the reverse side, I’d write “Vitamin K.”
- Don’t be stingy when making your cards. Never assume that some tidbit of information won’t be on a test because it probably will. Professors are notorious for putting little tidbits of seemingly insignificant information on tests. Sometimes I’d make upward of 300 flashcards in preparation for a test. I’d write down everything I could think of that may be on a test.
- Prepare your cards **well in advance** of the test. To save time and help increase retention, I made flashcards after *every* class,

pulling material from the lecture as well as the textbook. Then I'd go through them three times a day. When it came time to really start studying for the test, my flashcards were already made, and I already had a good grasp of the information.

- Shuffle the cards frequently to avoid learning them in a particular order.
- Review them as often as you can. Beyond my regularly scheduled study times, I would put the stack of flashcards in my backpack and flip through them whenever I had a moment—whether it be eating lunch or just chilling out.

## 30 Plan Ahead!

One of the best (and simplest) things you can do to supercharge the effectiveness and efficiency of your studying is to plan your study sessions ahead of time. For example, make a “Major Objective” list before you head off to study. Write down the things you know you need to accomplish during the time you spend studying. Then, keep your list with you when studying and “check off” items as you complete them.

If you don't know what you're going to study until you sit down to start studying, you waste a lot of time trying to figure out where to start and in what direction to go. But, when you plan ahead, you can eliminate a lot of unnecessary idle time. You'll be amazed at how smoothly things go.

## 31 Study with a Sense of Urgency!

A lot of times students will go to a local hangout to study—they'll see people they know and wind up “shooting the breeze” for the better part of the time they'd set aside to study. If

they'd just save the socializing for "happy hour" and approached studying with a *sense of urgency*—with an "I must get it done as fast and efficiently as possible" attitude—they'd storm through material with greater expediency than they ever thought possible.

You might consider bringing your iPod and headphones with you and listen to light, inspiring music while you study, such as Mozart—to help focus your attention as well as cue others that you're not there to chit-chat.

## 32 Tackle One Subject at a Time

I've never had success with "multitask studying"—that is, bouncing from subject to subject in one study sitting (e.g., statistics for 30 minutes, then economics for an hour, then constitutional law for 45 minutes). After I finished for the night, my brain felt like mush. Everything just ran together. I could hardly even remember what the heck I just studied.

When I sat down and focused my attention like a *laser beam* on one subject, and one subject only, for a full two hours, however, I felt like I was really closing in on becoming an expert on the subject.

I got especially good results doing this in preparation for a big test. While I didn't ignore my other subjects, I did move them to the "back burner" for the days leading up to a test. I didn't want anything else interfering with my preparation. On occasions when I'd have two or more tests during the same week (finals, for example), I'd keep a similar approach, splitting up my study sessions during the day. For example, between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., I might study nothing but statistics. Then I'd go have dinner, take a shower, re-fresh, then go tackle economics from 8:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.

### 33 Learn to Say “No”

It's nearly impossible to get good grades if you're constantly being pulled away from your studies to attend parties, movies, social gatherings and whatnot. If getting good grades is a priority, you need to learn to say “No.” Now that doesn't mean you can't go have fun—you just need to schedule it into your calendar, being careful it doesn't interfere with the time you have set aside for studying. If there's a conflict—if your friends decide they're going to go bowling, but you've already scheduled that time to study, you need to tell them to go ahead without you and hold firm. Don't cave under peer pressure like so many “jelly spines” do. Just say “No.”

### 34 Use Caffeine

Caffeine has been shown in numerous clinical studies to help increase concentration and focus, improving everything from typing speed and accuracy to athletic performance. All you need is a *little* caffeine, however. Too much (i.e., a half-gallon of coffee) can have just the *opposite* effect, making you jittery and scatterbrained. For best results, try drinking a cup of coffee or oolong tea 15 minutes before hitting the books.

### 35 Eat a Balanced Meal

Your mind, just like your muscles, needs good-quality, balanced nutrition in order to function properly. That means complex carbohydrates, quality protein, good fats and lots of pure water. Eating fast food, snack food and other garbage “gunks up” your system, causing any number of deleterious effects, including gastrointestinal upset, fatigue and impaired cognitive functioning.

It's especially important to avoid eating junk food before hitting the books. It's well known that foods rich in processed carbohydrates (candy bars, soda, fast food, cookies, crackers, pretzels, chips, cereal) cause your blood sugar to spike, then crash—this crash leading to low energy and drowsiness. In fact, eating a crummy, unbalanced lunch is typically the reason for the “midafternoon slumps” suffered by so many in America today.

Instead, an hour before studying, try eating a balanced meal, comprised of a portion of complex carbs and quality protein. (A portion is about the size of your clenched fist.) This will help fuel sustained energy while nourishing optimal brain functioning. Good complex carbs include brown rice, sweet potato, oatmeal and whole-wheat bread; quality proteins include lean meats like fish and chicken, egg whites, cottage cheese and protein powders.

My meal of choice before hitting the books was a quality nutrition shake with a few memory- and cognitive-enhancing nutrients mixed in—I've included the recipe for this “cognitive cocktail” on page 89.

## 36 Use the “Test Simulator” Approach

Pilots don't learn to fly by just reading about it. Eventually they need to get in the cockpit and take the controls. A good, not to mention safe, way to do this is through “flight simulators,” which replicate real-life flight situations.

Along these lines, I've found the best way to study for tests is to simulate real test situations by working through dozens if not hundreds of problems you think may be included on the test. Don't just read the material. Work it!

For example, if you're taking a math or statistics course, study by working as many problems as you possibly can relevant to the mate-



rial you've covered in class. You can often find sample test questions in your textbook or study guide that complements the text.

**TIP:** *Always* purchase the "optional" study guide when buying your books. Many times professors will pull test questions straight from that.

Oftentimes you can also find copies of past tests from your professor on file at the University Library. If available, you *must* take advantage of these. You'd be an absolute idiot not to. If the exact questions from these tests aren't asked on your upcoming test, similar questions will be. Make copies of these tests and work through each of them at least a couple times. If the library doesn't have these tests on file, ask your professor if they're available for study purposes. These are a real "gold mine."

## 37 Don't Take Shortcuts

You'll often get advice on how to skim material in order to save time studying. One piece of advice I once received was buying used textbooks with certain passages already highlighted. The thought being, someone else already did the hard work for me, highlighting the "important" stuff. That way, I wouldn't have to waste my time reading the "unimportant" stuff.

I came to find out quickly that this advice was about as useful as an ashtray on a motorcycle. For one, who's to say the student who had the book before you wasn't a complete moron? How did he or she know what was important and what wasn't?

Second, *everything* you've been assigned to read is important and "fair game" on a test. Thus, you'd be well served in reading *everything* you've been assigned.

**TIP:** I recommend buying only new books—ones free from someone else's nonsensical highlighting and underlining messes. From there, read everything you've been assigned at least once very carefully, underlining material you feel is important. I've found this is more efficient use of your time than is trying to take shortcuts—e.g., reading this, skipping that, bouncing from chapter to chapter with no rhyme or reason.

## CHAPTER 6

**How to Become an Ace Test Taker**

OK, this is where the “money” is. In order to do well in college, it’s more than important that you become a good test taker. If you don’t consider yourself in that vein, take heart—anyone can learn how to do it. Acing a test is simply a matter of being sufficiently prepared. Here’s how to prepare...

**38** Get All the Answers in Advance

The best way I know of to give yourself a good chance at acing big tests is to get all the answers ahead of time. You may think I’m joking, but I’m not. With some investigative work on your part, many times you can “score” the answers to any test in advance. Here’s how you do it—without breaking into your professor’s office after-hours.

1. Check with the University Library to see if your professor has old tests on file. Often, professors will just regurgitate the same questions on exams this semester as they used in previous semesters. If the library doesn’t have these tests, ask your professor, during office hours (you don’t want to tip off others in the class), if old tests are available to help with your study efforts. If the professor has gotten to know you and has taken a liking to you (see Chapter 3), he or she might just share them with you.
2. Either the professor or his or her teaching assistant (T.A.) will usually hold optional “review sessions” a few evenings before the big test. When I was in school, about 90 percent of students in the class failed to show up to these. They just

blew 'em off. Big mistake! I was amazed at how helpful these reviews were, with the professor or T.A. all but *giving away* the questions that were going to be on the test. You'd be an absolute idiot to skip these.

3. Purchase the "optional" study guides that accompany your textbook, and work through all the problems relevant to the material to be covered on the test. Like I said, professors will often pull questions straight from these guides.
4. Put yourself in your professor's shoes. If you were him or her, what questions would you ask on an exam? Develop 50 such questions and study them—you'll be surprised at how many of them, or ones similar to them, will show up on your test. Trust your intuition.

## 39 Use Earplugs

Someone smacking his gum, coughing, tapping his shoe or making any number of other annoying sounds during a test can completely throw you off your game and cause you to lose your focus. You can avoid such distractions by investing in a good set of earplugs, available for a few bucks at your local grocery store. Look for the foam kind, which expand to fill your entire ear cavity after you insert them. They block out virtually all sounds, allowing you peace and quiet when test taking.

## 40 Get a Good Night's Rest

Do not, under any circumstances, cram the night before a big test. "All nighters" just don't work—you'll simply be committing the information to your short-term memory, and you'll forget almost everything you never really learned within an hour or two. Worse, clinical studies show cognitive functioning and memory are greatly

impaired in a sleep-deprived state, making you more likely to forget the stuff you really did learn. Compete in an all-night cram marathon, and odds are you'll "bonk" big time during the test.

A better plan is to prepare adequately, well in advance, and get a good eight hours of sleep the night before the test. You'll feel better and think better feeling refreshed and energized.

## 41 Try the "Memory Dump" Method

At the beginning of the test, scribble down on scrap paper all the helpful information you can remember—names, dates, formulas, facts, etc. Then, after scanning the test questions, do a second "memory dump" and begin.

## 42 True/False Exams

- On true/false questions, if one part of the statement is false, the answer is "false." All you are looking for is one piece of information to make the statement false.
- Assume all true/false questions are true. This mindset will help going into the exam because now you are just looking for that one item to make the statement false.
- Look for words like "always" and "never" in the question—they're usually a good indicator that the answer is false. These types of words are called "absolutes," and there are very few absolutes that are true.
- Words like "some," "most," "rarely" and "usually" typically indicate the answer is true. This is due to the fact that these words are not absolutes and refer to a more "grey area" of meanings.
- Cross out "double negatives." Some professors use double negatives in statements for no other reason than to confuse you. In

cases where you see a double negative, cross out the negative and the prefix. For example, “Most students would not be dissatisfied with a 1.0 GPA.” When you cross out “not” and “dis” and reread the statement, the answer is clear.

STATEMENT	CROSS OUT	MEANING
Not dissatisfied	<del>Not</del> dissatisfied	<b>satisfied</b>
Not untruthful	<del>Not</del> untruthful	<b>truthful</b>
Not untrustworthy	<del>Not</del> untrustworthy	<b>trustworthy</b>

## 43 Multiple Choice Exams

- Try to answer the question on your own, without looking at the answers. You might try covering the answers with a sheet of paper, then sliding the sheet down, one answer at a time, reading each carefully to see if it matches the answer you came up with. This can prevent you from feeling overwhelmed by looking at all of the answers at once and will encourage you to read each answer carefully.
- Time flies when taking a test, so answer the easier questions first. If you come to a question you’re not sure about, don’t waste valuable time trying to figure it out—simply circle it and come back to it later.
- Cross out each answer that is obviously incorrect. Sometimes you can deduce the right answer by process of elimination.
- Watch for the statement “all of the above”: Those answers are usually correct, but... if one of the statements is incorrect, then you’ve just eliminated two possible answers (that specific answer and “all of the above”).
- Words such as “every,” “all,” “none,” “always” and “only” are superlatives that indicate the correct answer must be an undisputed fact.

- “Usually,” “often,” “generally,” “may” and “seldom” are qualifiers that could indicate a true statement.
- Look for grammatical clues. If the stem ends with the indefinite article “an,” for example, then the correct response probably begins with a vowel.
- “Funny” answers are usually wrong.
- “None of the above” is usually an incorrect answer.
- The longest response is often the correct one, because the instructor tends to load it with qualifying adjectives or phrases.

## 44 Essay Exams

- Always read through the entire exam first, and follow directions carefully. Look for key words in the question, such as “list,” “describe,” “compare and contrast” and “outline,” which require different types of answers.
- Don’t “write around” the question—answer it directly and concisely.
- Inject your essay with specific facts from the material you learned from lecture and the text—names, dates, quotations, etc. These answers are more impressive than vague answers filled with generalities. Commit to memorizing a half-dozen good “factoids” to drop in your essays.
- Write legibly with a blue or black ballpoint pen. Pencils and felt-tip pens smudge and make for a messy essay. Bring a bottle of “Liquid Paper” to correct any mistakes you might make. Clean essays will almost always score better than sloppy ones, irrespective of their content.
- Make sure your essay is well-structured and organized. A long “James Joyce-like” stream of consciousness won’t win you any points with the professor.

## 45 Don't Be Afraid to Ask Questions During the Exam

If you're unclear about a question on the exam, don't be afraid to ask your professor for clarification. Simply raise your hand, and he or she will walk over to where you're sitting and discuss it quietly with you. When I did this, I was amazed at how many times my professor all but gave me the right answer!