

Study Skills That Make the Grade

By Dr. Raymond J. Huntington

With “back-to-school” euphoria a very distant memory and first quarter report cards in hand, many students may feel the pressure rising as classes and homework become more difficult. While it’s important to devote plenty of time to studying, students also need to make the best use of that time to make real progress. Here are some recommendations for optimizing the learning process both in the classroom and at home.

Preview textbook lessons. Many students find it helpful to preview textbook lessons before reading through them. Introductions will generally outline the scope of the information and give advance notice of some of the most important points. Chapter headings and sub-headings will often define key principles or ideas. And summaries will often provide a concise overview of the information students are expected to retain. By reading the introductions, headings, and summaries, the student can construct a mental map of the content, complete with guideposts to some of the most important points.

Pause to think about the material during the reading and studying process. As students read through material, it can be helpful to pause on occasion and summarize what they’ve read. After reading a few paragraphs, for example, restating the main idea and key points in their own words can help students retain and organize the information.

Take notes effectively. Students can also make more strategic use of their study time by learning how to focus on the most important information in a lecture or textbook lesson. Taking notes on the main points that are outlined in textbook chapter headings and subheadings (which are often in capital letters, bold face type or italics) is an effective strategy for maximizing the value of homework. Listening carefully for distinct or subtle verbal cues from an instructor (eg:

“One of the key points to remember from today’s lesson” or “now I’d like each of you to think about the passage we just read”) can help students retain the most important information from classroom lessons.

Pay special attention to textbook graphics. Students should also remember that diagrams and tables in textbooks are often used to clarify main ideas – and are also good indicators of information that the author (and a teacher) may consider important.

Engage in self-testing. Many students find tests a nerve-racking experience. Self-testing, on the other hand, can be a low-stress way for students to ascertain how well they understand the material, and pinpoint areas that need additional time and effort. The process is generally simple. By taking a look at the points of a lecture or the headings in a textbook chapter, the student can often determine what types of questions might be asked on a test.

Going through the process can therefore help the student define the most important information to

remember, and prepare effectively for the real tests to come.

Establish a consistent study schedule. Physical fitness experts often encourage adults who are embarking on exercise programs to “establish a routine and stick to it.” This is equally good advice for the mental exercise of studying. Setting aside a time and place for studying every day of the week is important for “getting into the study habit” and the right frame of mind. And the usual advice about the time and place always bears repeating: Students should avoid the distractions of television, telephones and recreational web surfing, and they should work in a well-lit, organized environment.

Take on the most difficult assignments first. Most students have one or more subjects that they find especially difficult. Because homework in these subjects tends to demand sharper concentration skills, students should try and take them on when they’re most alert. Getting the harder work out of the way before going on to easier assignments alleviates anxiety and helps students avoid being caught in a late night trap in which the work becomes more difficult because of fatigue and frustration.

While it’s always important to establish good study habits from the earliest grades, it becomes even more important as students reach middle and secondary school, where assignments tend to require more critical thinking and independent work by the student. And while it’s only natural to occasionally feel a bit overwhelmed, these strategies can make that work much more manageable and academically rewarding as the year goes on.

Dr. Raymond J. Huntington is co-founder of Huntington Learning Center, which has helped children achieve success in school for 26 years. For more information about how Huntington can help your child, call 1 800 CAN LEARN.

