



Old Patterns – Learning to Learn

Study Skills

Many of us have been given so much advice, so many times, on the best way to study! We have been told the best times, the best places, even the best foods to eat, to help us remember what we learn.

But everyone is different. What works for others may not work for you. For example, when the “study tips” tell you to work quietly and alone, you might feel like asking how that is possible with three children under 6 years old! Or maybe you are someone who just needs other people in the room, or to have the TV playing loud, in order to feel comfortable while working.

Instead of trying to follow a checklist of “good study habits”, ask yourself what works for you, and what is possible in your situation. Here are three questions and four ideas to consider in figuring out what helps you:

- 1. What time of day do I learn best?** We have to study when we have time, but if we have a choice, it’s a good idea to think about when we feel most awake. Most people are either morning or night people. To test whether you’re a day or night person, ask yourself: “Do I like waking up early and getting a start on the day?” If yes, try to set some time to study in the morning. If you answer yes to the question “Do I get going later in the afternoon or evening?” then you may be a night person; so set aside time in the evening to study. This gives information the best chance to stick to your brain. Then try to make that your regular time to study.
- 2. Where should I study?** Be creative – you don’t have to be in a library (although they are great). Places like empty classrooms, coffee shops, the back of an auditorium, a bus or subway - anywhere you feel comfortable will do. Try to help your family to understand that your study time is important. One thing that some people find helpful is to make the place you study neat and organized – they clear away any trash and organize their papers so they can find everything. Other people have a glorious, crazy mess on their desks that looks confusing to other people - but they know where everything is, and they feel comfortable with a jumble of stuff around them.

- 3. What if I Don't Feel Like It?** Well, try to just do it sometimes. Even when you feel like you are wasting your time even trying, making a habit of going over what you learned in class. However bad you feel, try to just show up to your study spot and review even for 10 minutes. The routine of reviewing and reading your notes will help you in the end, because that is you getting into new habits - habits you'll be doing automatically on the days when it doesn't feel like a waste of time. Of course, if you are having a really tough go, or what you are studying is bringing up thoughts and feelings that you really need a break from, then take a break.
- 4. Give yourself a break.** Just as having a regular study time helps, so does taking a 5-10 minute break every hour. Rest your eyes, wash your face...turn off the brain for a few minutes. Then get back to it. If you find yourself falling asleep, stop where you are. Let yourself sleep a bit - sitting up, not lying down. You'll find this "sitting doze" a form of meditation that helps you focus.
- 5. Ask for Help.** Maybe you think something is wrong with you if you need extra help, or that it is for people who are stupid. The opposite is true. Asking for help is smart. Most people feel nervous or embarrassed asking for help. We get too many messages that it's important to do things for ourselves, all by ourselves. There's also the idea that if we ask for help, we'll be labelled as abnormal, and many of us don't want to stick out, or be a hassle. But having helpers with schoolwork, such as tutors, are totally normal. Think about Olympic athletes and their coaches. One on one help works, and it is usually available at colleges and community-based programs for free.
- 6. Talk to your teacher if you are having trouble.** Don't wait until you feeling like you are sinking. Most students with problems wait too long to talk to someone. You can ask your teacher to refer you to the tutoring services at your college – he or she will be able to recommend the people and places that fit your needs the best.
- 7. Go to the student counseling office.** If you do not want to talk to your teacher, for any reason, most colleges have a counseling office that will help you find a tutor. They will also know how to help, and where to refer you, for many non-academic problems: financial, personal, and family problems.

Studying is a whole way of life. Hang in there while you are getting used to it. Try to develop new habits based on what works for you. Remember, it only takes 30 days of regularly doing something - even something brand new - to turn it into a habit.

Remembering

Many of us find we forget a lot. We may have needed to forget bad things that happened to us - sometimes addictions may have helped us do that. But addictions can make it hard to remember what we learn, and we can get lost in them... and we can sometimes forget we are worthwhile human beings who deserve love. Or, we might just "forget" our notebooks for class, and "get lost" on the way to the dentist...

We can learn about what helps us remember by thinking like a detective and noticing our own patterns. For example, notice the times when you remember better and the sorts of times when you always forget. Most of us find we forget more when we get anxious. When you think about the things you do, try to be curious instead of ashamed. As much as you can try to be gentle with yourself when you watch yourself. Please don't judge or talk unkindly to yourself or you may find yourself hiding your old patterns from yourself!!! There are some things you can do to help yourself remember – read on!

Examples of things you can do to help you remember

Some people find it helpful to keep a datebook or diary, make lists, or put post-it notes on the front door. Others find it helps to repeat things that they want to remember out loud, over and over again. Others do things like walking as they try to remember, or moving their watch to the "wrong" hand to remind them of something they don't want to forget. Some of us find that we remember things better if we see them, others if we hear them, still others if we do something physical, like moving or touching. Some of us seem to find bits of all of these ways helpful.

We can increase our chances of remembering what we have to do, and things we learn in class, if we find the ways to learn and to remember that work best for us. To get there, we have to explore and play.