



Suzy's Strategies: Study Skills for the College Classroom

So what are some of the practical suggestions behind *Suzy's Strategies*? This article offers some practical ideas for enhancing the experience of learning in college and getting the most out of this.

Episode One: Strategies to do Well in a Course

Doing well in college has been a topic of study for many years. Generations of students have gone through their studies and come out with positive experiences and practical learning. While the present generation of students face a large range of challenges, higher education can offer plenty of tools to help them face a complex world.

When students face a challenging course, it helps to make a plan. Students may learn a lot about a course before they even step into the classroom. They may read up about the course and the faculty member on the college or university site. They may download the syllabus, purchase the textbooks and course materials, and gain a deeper sense of the course. They may even take some informal routes to gain information about the course

through the World Wide Web, with the gentle warning that there's also a lot of inaccurate information online.

The course setting—the lecture halls, the classrooms, the laboratories, the online course site, or off-campus settings—all may affect the experience of the course. The number of students in the course will also affect how it is experienced. Understanding the course contents, the faculty member(s), the fellow students, and the course settings may give students some understandings of what may be in store!

Episode Two: Show up and Being Ready

It's important to show up at all scheduled course sessions and even the non-required ones. Students need to situate themselves to be able to focus on the learning. In a large lecture hall, that may mean a seat close in. If it's in an online learning management system, that may mean having the computer set up to fully access the course site.

Being "ready" for class early on means having read and understood the syllabus thoroughly. It means having read the tables of contents for the course textbooks to understand the overview and also the assigned readings in the books, the online articles, the coursepacks, or other information streams.

Another aspect of being ready is to have all necessary materials purchased. These may include lab supplies, computing calculators, art supplies, mini digital video tapes, geology kits, or any number of required course materials. Some courses may require having access to a laptop, so this should also be considered. Waiting to purchase course supplies may mean a lag in starting a course, which may be harmful for a student's learning and performance.

Staff Article

Episode Three: Making Time

Studying well takes time. While national estimates are that more than half of all college students work at least part-time, many traditional-age students may find that balance very difficult. Work schedules may be unpredictable, or they may sap student energies that should be directed toward the learning. Students need to decide how much time they may afford for work and plan accordingly. Cutting back on work will often mean a lower income, so students may have to adjust their spending and not take on debt that they cannot handle. This is all part of setting up a manageable life.

College students also spend much time and energy on socializing—during nights, weekends, and the normal weekdays. Many find themselves feeling too tired to attend class. Too many late nights and too much partying can leave students “trashed,” and that’s no way to be attentive and engaged in the classroom.

Making time also involves learning to study when their minds are the clearest. For some students, they can think most quickly in the early a.m. For others, they are “night owls” who are the most fresh at night.

One other aspect of managing time relates to planning ahead by using a calendar or scheduler—whether on paper or electronically (on mobile devices or as part of email systems). Tests may be inserted on schedulers, as well as due dates for important assignments. It also helps to set up intermediate deadlines for assignments and work leading up to a larger project.

Episode Four: Take Notes with High Learning Value

Course lectures, demonstrations, presentations, and performances can seem very hard-to-forget in the moment, but after a day or two, main ideas may fade. This is why many students take

notes during lectures—whether on digital audio recorders, mobile devices, laptops, or on paper. (Not all faculty allow digital recordings of their classes, so be sure to get permission first—early on in the term.)

The point is to manage both paper and digital files in a readable way, so these may be accessed later and still make sense and be legible / audible / understandable. Optimally, notes should enhance and synthesize the ideas learned from the various sources—the various lecturers, presenters, videos, and print sources. Strong notes should indicate where the various information came from, in case students need to go back and refer to an original source. Important points need to be identified and summarized for easy review for quizzes and exams. For example, some notes may consist of outlines that put information into some comprehensible order.

Notes (whether digital or print) need to be labeled clearly with the contents, the dates of capture, the course, and other important organizational information.



Episode Five: Staying Organized

Students need to be able to manage themselves effectively.

Life management may involve organizing a healthy living space. This may involve space to relax. This would involve access to regular nutrition, regular and appropriate exercise, access to healthcare, and a hygienic living space.

Staying organized may mean setting up a budget and living within it, without the undue stresses of unpaid bills.

Staying organized may involve smart security measures to stay healthy and safe, whether students are out in public, having fun with friends, or going online to conduct research.

Staying organized may also involve knowing where one's learning materials are!

Students all have different preferences for how organized they want to be, and one person's "organized" may be another's "messy." Still, knowing where things are will lower the stress level and enhance life efficiency.

Episode Six: Get Clarification

If any part of a course curriculum is unclear, it helps to review the materials and re-read to get clarity. If there are parts of learning which still aren't clear, the teaching and research assistants may be able to provide support.

Many students also form study groups to enhance their learning and to prepare for exams by quizzing each other.

If students have worked hard to understand some important points in class, they should also contact the professor during office hours for more clarification. Some professors may be more accessible by email.

Another way to develop clearer understandings is to practice the new learning. That may be one way to reinforce the learning into the long-term memory.

Episode Seven: Use Campus Resources

Universities offer a range of support services to students. There are tutoring centers with particular areas of subject matter focus. There are offices to support students with disabilities. Students may access counseling services. There are multiple libraries on most campuses—with informed librarians, various informational collections, and electronic databases. Many resources are available online. There are career and job placement offices. There are gyms with swimming pools, racquet-ball courts, basketball courts, volleyball courts, weight-lifting rooms, and a number of exercise and dance classes. There are also external fields and tracks. Numerous student clubs thrive on campuses. Student newspapers also offer informational resources and journalistic opportunities for learners.

Episode Eight: Stay Motivated

The years of attaining higher education may involve some difficult tests, long nights, personal life challenges, and financial challenges—among others. College life may be drama-free, but it doesn't always happen that way. Many students, for example, require some six years for a four-year degree. And many pursue their studies through the graduate levels—for master's and doctorate degrees.

Because higher education involves long-term commitments, it helps to stay motivated. How people motivate themselves will differ based on people's personalities. Students who align their learning with their personal interests and strengths may find it easier to stay motivated. Universities provide various self-assessments to help people understand themselves and their preferences better.

Students also need to reward themselves for their learning and achievements. Healthy rewards may involve some free time to enjoy a hobby like Frisbee golf or yoga or a visit to the local bookstore.

Campuses have numerous extracurricular activities and social events—based around movies, international dining, internationally known speakers, and others. Being active helps students live rich lives (if not done to excess), and a healthy extra-curricular mix often enhances study.

Episode Nine: A Comfortable Place to Study

Academic studies require concentration. People all have different preferences for how they like to learn. Some like to be in a social space with friends packed two-deep all around them. Others like an isolated carrel in the library. Some like white noise in the background while others prefer music or television; yet, others like absolute silence.

Learners that are self-aware about their preferences may design their lives to have access to these spaces.

Be careful to avoid study habits that are unhealthy—such as snacking on unhealthy foods, smoking, or drinking alcohol during studies.

Episode Ten: Anticipate and Prepare for Exams

Test anxiety is not unusual among students. There are methods to lower the amounts of anxiety.

One way is to be prepared. Students who do well tend to “over-prepare” by writing up helpful notes, experiencing mock exams, and studying in ways that work for them.

Last-minute cram sessions are not advisable. Academic dishonesty—in any form—is discouraged and may put a student’s honest learning efforts, their course grade, and their reputations, at risk.

Episode Eleven: Take Healthy Breaks

Too much study may reach a point of diminishing returns, which is all to say that it may stop being that effective. A healthy life has to have a balance of relaxation, socializing, exercising, and other activities besides study. “College towns” often have a range of entertainment, social, exercise, and other opportunities.

Episode Twelve: Strategies Review

A general strategies review examines what is working and what is not working in a student’s life. Then, it helps to logically plan ways to enhance the balance in a student’s life for more contentment and more effective learning.



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