

Study Strategies for Before, During, and After Class

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By Angela Zanardelli Sickler

For 10 years, I've been teaching study skills to college students, both individually and in the classroom. The vantage from my office offers me a clear view of students devouring information during tutoring appointments and focusing intently on the strategies shared during study skills counseling sessions. The effort and time they pour into comprehending their course material is irrefutable. However, when I ask students what they know about the lecture's content before arriving at class, the answer is almost always the same: "Nothing."

Students seem to direct the majority of their energy to learning the material after class, which causes an unnecessary cycle of complication. Their time in class is spent attempting to keep up with the material by taking notes word for word. This scramble to gather information can cause some students to give up and simply check out for the remainder of the lecture. By the time class is over, all that remains for the notetakers are pages filled with new, intimidating words and inapplicable concepts. They then attempt to study this material, even though they've yet to identify the lesson's objectives. More often than not, their frustration leads to avoidance and procrastination. The result of this chain reaction becomes a dangerous combination of heightened levels of stress, lack of preparedness, and recurring test anxiety.

To break this destructive study cycle, students must recognize the importance of being prepared for lecture. A short amount of time spent previewing the day's material prior to class can save hours of ineffective study later. The following is a three-step study method that I share with almost every student I meet. The feedback from those who follow the plan consistently has been overwhelmingly positive. These tips were written to directly address students, so please share this system however you wish with your classes. While course styles vary, we will assume for the purpose of this article that the course utilizes a textbook and instructors hold exams after every 4–5 chapters.

Step 1. Pre-Lecture Prep: Within 24 hours before lecture, it's imperative to preview the material to be covered. This step rarely takes longer than 30 minutes, especially once you're familiar with how to properly preview information.

- Read the title and chapter objectives. Skipping the title and chapter objectives can be detrimental. It's virtually impossible to process information when you have no overarching theme to apply it to.
- Read the chapter summary. The summary combined with the information on the title page can act as a movie preview, creating intrigue and providing a bit of familiarity with the concepts.
- Skim the chapter by reading subheadings and viewing the content under those subheadings. Begin applying what you see within the text and images to what you already know.
- Acknowledge vocabulary that you're unfamiliar with so that you're not intimidated when you hear the same term(s) again in lecture. Also, be sure to note questions that arise during the pre-lecture prep.

Step 2. Be Active during Lecture : Now that you've effectively prepped for the lecture's content, taking notes and following along should be far more manageable. However, concentration can be affected by a variety of factors, so to ensure success, practice the tips below:

- Distracted? Take a moment to reflect on the cause of the distraction. Are you hungry? Interested in the laptop screen of the person in front of you? Struggling to see the material? All of these problems have rather simple solutions.
- If you notice that personal issues are flooding your thoughts during class, keep a separate sheet of paper next to your notes to jot down your concern and assign a time to deal with it. The more we repress worry, the more it presents itself. Validating the thought and scheduling time to address it can help you regain focus quickly.

- Remember those questions you noted during Step 1? Make it a game to try to find the answers during class. Consider it an academic scavenger hunt.
- Be sure to include confusing or incomplete information on your notes so that you can get more complete answers later.

Step 3. Post-Lecture Review: Within 24 hours of the lecture, it's important to solidify the information that you took in. This is the most time-consuming step within the process, but it becomes easier by consistently following the first two steps.

- Take what you prepared before lecture and compare it to what was discussed in class. Did the information seem to link together more readily during lecture?
- Utilize your resources (textbook, lecture slides, teaching assistant, tutor, supplemental instruction, etc.) to fill in any gaps that remain from lecture. Do not ignore information you don't understand—it is not going away.
- Create a study tool from the lecture material. Examples would be creating flashcard questions from your notes (make sure they're applicable questions, not word/definition) or pulling together a self-test from the end-of-chapter questions.
- From here on out, all you need are short, frequent reviews of your comprehensive study tool until it's time for a more detailed in-depth practice session before the exam.

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