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Do You Have Tips To Help Me Be A Successful Student?

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A weekly question/answer column

Do You Have Tips To Help Me Be A Successful Student?

Vince Lafferty answers:*

Some tips that may help you be a successful student can be divided into three areas: 1. What you do before class. 2. What you do during class. 3. What you do after class.

- What can you do before classes begin? Most of the research comes from successful students. Do you have a plan for your education? It is important to know where you are going even in the short term. Every student ought to have an outline of classes and/or potential classes. This comes from contacting and discussing a plan with an academic counselor.
- Next, do you know your learning style? Some people are visual learners who need charts and pictures and put class notes in an outline form. Others are auditory learners who need study groups, lectures or taped notes. A third learning style is kinesthetic. This type of learning takes place when you study with another person, use note cards, stand up and walk around or create a model of the information. Almost all courses can be converted into one of these learning styles. Having a good attitude, even about a subject that you have little interest in, will improve your chances of success in a class.
- Prepare for every class. Most instructors will hand out a syllabus in the first class meeting. This is a guide for you so that you can be prepared. Often, I have been asked questions concerning the reading. There is no definitive answer. I indicate to students that the material should be read with the idea of becoming familiar with the vocabulary or concepts and do not try to memorize the book. Some instructors may not even refer to the book. Some may follow the book very closely. Be prepared before you enter class. Have a notebook, pen or pencil, calculator if needed. Do you need a laptop computer? Most research indicates no.
- What happens in class? One important critical skill that must be developed is listening strategy. To be successful, a student must be present physically and regularly. It also means being in a position to hear and see the speaker, focusing on the speaker, and maintaining eye contact. Sitting close to the speaker is a good method of maintaining concentration. Listening also means being mentally alert: avoiding mental distractions such as daydreaming, talking and thinking about family problems and everything else going on.
- Usually everyone will take notes during class. Note taking is different than listening. Note taking forces you to listen and you actively participate in class. Have a notebook for each class; develop a note-taking style that is suited for you. There are many different formats that can help you as well as common abbreviations and symbols that can be developed. Do not try to take down every word but the general concept or essential points. If

something is written on a board, an overhead or a computer presentation then it is important. Often instructors use signal or key words, such as, “The four parts of this concept are...” When another concept is introduced start the process over.

- What to do after class? When class is over the note taking still continues. Review notes soon to correct mistakes, fill in information, emphasize key concepts, and review, review, review and review. If your learning style demands a study group then form or join one. Meet your instructor after class for clarification or just get to know the instructor. Ask the instructor if you can tape the class if that is your style. You may wish to get tutoring help from other students. It is also a good idea to develop some memory strategies such as review, rehearse, associate or organize. After class you should also begin the process over again for the next class.
- Time management is always a key. If you are a working adult or have family obligations then it becomes crucial. What is the best method? Depends on the person and situation. Some students treat school like a job and spend the appropriate time in that manner. Others like to be active in many different parts of life and can concentrate better that way.

* Vince Lafferty is Utah State University Extension Director of Independent Study and Distance Education