

Student Success Tools

The 15 Habits of Top College Students

A lot of the time—unbeknownst to some students—it's a question of good habits: things you do on a regular basis that set you aside from the hordes of other, more scattered students. In the hopes of separating the sheep from the goats, here are what we've found to be the 15 habits of the most successful college students. You'll find that these scholars:

1. **Plan ahead.** Not only do they know when the tests and papers fall in the semester, but they have a pretty good sense of what work needs to be done each week. Nice and balanced: no panic attacks or all-nighters.
2. **Divide up the tasks.** Readings get divided up into manageable chunks (not 200 pages in one sitting). Quizzes and tests are studied for over the course of a week (not at 3 a.m. the night before). And paper ideas start gestating when the assignment is handed out (not two days before it's due when you can barely formulate an idea, much less think through an issue).
3. **Manage their surroundings.** It's hard to do any real work without the tools for the job: a working computer with the right software, a printer, and even ink and paper to go with it. Not to mention the materials of the course: a full set of lecture notes, the textbooks and articles, and course handouts and assignments.
4. **Don't kid themselves.** For instance, when you think you're studying but you're really tweeting about how you barely survived your bonfire-jumping last night. Or when you're alternating between reading the E-article and checking out your friend's Facebook page every eight seconds or so. Or when the only thing being studied in your study group is the other members of your study group. You're the easiest person you know to deceive. Don't.
5. **Manage their feelings.** It's difficult to excel in a course if you're feeling inadequate, bummed out, or doomed to fail. Students who know how to focus on their own positive achievements—rather than on what they got on the quiz that counts about 2% of the course grade—have a leg up on the rest.



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Successful college students:

6. **Challenge themselves.** Successful students are intellectually energetic. So when they read, they think actively about what they are reading. When they go to class, they don't zone out or text (at least most of the time). On tests and papers, they pounce on the questions and answer them directly and fully. This distinguishes their work from that of their cohorts trying to coast their way through the course.

7. **Are persistent.** In some courses, some of the work is tough. Maybe it's a problem set that needs really hard thinking, or a paper that has to go through a number of painful drafts, or a presentation that has to be rehearsed repeatedly. The successful student doesn't flinch at the extra effort needed or the uncertainty of the result. His or her motto is: I'll get this right if it kills me. (Don't worry, it won't.)

8. **Don't cut corners.** Tired...? "I'm still going to make it to that 9 a.m. lecture." Late-night review session? "Like the owl, I do my best work at night." Three-hour final? "I'll stay to the bitter end. Maybe I can touch up my essay and collect a few extra points."

9. **Are open to feedback.** While it's easy and more fun to throw away your graded papers and exams or conveniently forget to pick them up, the best students carefully study the comments and go over any mistakes they've made. And then when the next graded piece of work rolls around, they take another look at the previous set of comments to see if there are any mistakes that they can correct on the new piece of work.

10. **Engage the prof.** ...by demonstrating a genuine interest in learning the material that the professor has devoted his or her life to mastering. Like going to an office hour, talking to the professor before or after class, or even sending a short E-mail asking some erudite question. People like someone who shares their interests.



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Successful college students:

11. **Keep themselves in tip-top shape.** Never underestimate the value of sleeping and eating right. As basic as it may sound, staying healthy is a crucial part of a successful semester. For some reason, being sick as a dog just isn't conducive to mastering topology, Russian history, or international finance.

12. **Look out for No. 1.** While some students are willing to blow off a week of school to satisfy the needs of others—for example, a demanding boss during busy season or an Uncle Dick who schedules his third wedding two days before finals—successful students know that college is their job and make doing well their highest priority. Especially during the college busy season, the last month of the semester when those big-ticket items like the term paper and the final exam roll around and two thirds of the grade is won or lost.

13. **Visualize success.** It always helps you achieve a goal if you devote some time to visualizing yourself achieving it. Not just vaguely daydreaming but seeing yourself a success and experiencing the feelings that go with success. This will give you the motivation to go out and do what you have to do to make it happen.

14. **Learn from experience.** Instead of coming unglued if something goes wrong in a course—say, bombing a test or paper—the best students view any setbacks as learning experiences that, in the end, teach them what they need to know to do better in this course—and all their other courses too.

15. **Aim high** (or at least to a decent level). In college, simple regurgitation of the basics doesn't cut it. Top students know that the minimum gets a B minus, at best. And that, in many courses, a B minus puts you toward the bottom of the heap.

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