Ideas for Effective Study

The first step to doing well on a test—to remembering what the teacher wants you to know—is to make sure you understand the information and have stored it in your memory—so you can get to it when asked.

A review of study texts, web sites and other expert advice led us to this conclusion: any effective study strategy includes activities before you read or listen, while you are reading or listening, and after you read or listen.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN the class or study session

- **Determine your purpose** for studying: to pass tests? to master concepts for future use? to gather information for a research project?
- **Review** what you learned at the last session
- **Review** your prior knowledge: what do you know already? Consider even the most seemingly trivial information.

Preview the material

- Skim the text book and any class handouts for titles, chapter headings and chapter subsections, summaries and abstracts (introductory overviews). Often teachers give lists of important facts, dates, names or artworks, and you can target those from the time you begin to read.
• Study illustrations and graphics like charts and diagrams.

Wouldn’t it be faster just to read? Maybe for now, but not in the long run. By surveying the “big print” items, you can discover the author’s “schema” —that is, the main ideas to which the details and ideas will be connected. Similarly, charts and diagrams often have lots of material condensed into an image you can take in much more quickly. Even if you spend time on preview now, you’ll make it up in time spent cramming the night before the test—because you’ll remember more. Even better, you’re much more likely to get a good grade because your schema will be established, and the information will come to mind more quickly.

• Consider the author’s credentials and experience. This, too, gives clues to the author’s purpose and main concerns. An anthropologist writing about dance in other cultures will have a different purpose from a choreographer.

• Make predictions about what you will learn

• Make a list of questions that give you a purpose for reading / listening

• Create visual images—charts, diagrams and drawings—of what you will learn. For class notes, you may want to lay out what you expect to be key topics for that day’s lecture.

Why bother? Going into the session with questions and hypotheses gives you a purpose for reading and listening—to find the answers or to find out if you were right! If you’re wrong, you’ll notice and make corrections.
WHILE YOU ARE READING OR LISTENING

- Interact with print by annotating (margin comments, numbering lists, etc. See Annotation handout for more), underlining, or—at the very least—just following with a finger.

- Add new information to prior knowledge: consciously recognize when new facts and ideas are connected to what you already know. Why? Because you’re building knowledge centers. The bigger the center (like a town on a map) the easier it is to find.

- Answer your pre-questions

- Clarify original predictions

- Adjust visual images, maps, cluster, and diagram: does someone look different from what you expected? Did you get proportions wrong?

- Annotate the text / TAKE NOTES in class: IT’S SO IMPORTANT we’re repeating it.

- Examine the purpose / validity of argument: critique the author’s ideas (if that’s an option); watch for his or her biases and extreme claims (as well as what you recognize as valid and correct).

- Note key words: these are likely to be on the test and without understanding them you will miss key concepts. Often they’ll be in special fonts, bold or italicized, so you may notice them first when you’re skimming—and they’ll become centers on your knowledge map.

Use metacognition: What’s that? Metacognition is noticing and learning how you learn (or write or create art). It’s what you know about the way you learn and know things.

- Monitor your comprehension: if you DON’T understand, do something NOW. What’s causing the difficulty?

  Vocabulary? Look up words, ask a friend for help.

  Lack of needed prior knowledge? Try an encyclopedia article for background information. For international students, asking an American may sometimes help a lot.

  Concentration? Follow the text with your finger or a pencil. Take notes. Give yourself breaks. Review often.
• While you are learning, be aware of what works and what doesn’t; be alert for what best helps you remember. (See handout on memory and learning styles for more)

• Talk to yourself about what you’re learning—yes, you can even do this out loud (no one’s listening!)

• Regulate and monitor the time you spend in a session, your need for breaks and (see above) your comprehension.

• Notice when you have trouble understanding or questions about what will happen or where an idea will lead: Re-read, skip, read ahead.

Let the text help you learn:

• Watch for syntactic (sentence structure) & semantic (vocabulary choices) clues

• Be aware of patterns like comparison or story-telling, lists or definitions

• Watch for literal & inferential meaning; look for figurative language and bias.

• Use vocabulary strategies: can you understand a word because of what the rest of the passage says? Are there other words in the passage that seem to mean the same thing?

WHERE IS YOUR DICTIONARY?

• Determine what’s most important: the text and the teacher can help with this. So can your own preview (completed BEFORE you started reading).

AFTER the class or study session

• Recall

• Relate

• **Organize:** the material to fit your goals and purpose
• Map or diagram the material in clusters (webs) or flowcharts.

• Summarize aloud or on paper

**Analyze**
• Sort the facts an author presents from his or her opinion.
• Evaluate the author’s opinions; do you agree?
• Relate the author’s points to what the teacher has said and vice versa.
• For all texts but especially art history, compare the text to the images. Try to recognize the elements the author describes and understand how the illustrations contribute to the meaning.

**Use Memory Strategies**

• Note cards

• Write important facts on notebook paper for later study.

• Mnemonics: compose silly sentences, alphabetize or make acronyms, associate the unknown with the known (but not necessarily related): for example, that molecule’s shape reminds me of a dining room table with 8 chairs and balloons.

• Internal dialog: especially useful for auditory learners

• Answer all your pre-questions

• Make sure you accomplished your purposes

• Complete your visual image

• Ask yourself questions about what you read.

• Give yourself a test.
• Sketch important images (art works or scenes)

• Make associations. Associate new material with prior knowledge. Also, at this stage begin to associate what’s new with things that are related in ways that help you remember. Maybe an artwork makes you think of Mickey Mouse . . . and the artist’s name starts with M.

Or maybe the year a work was completed has the same numbers as your ATM PIN.

Or the color is like your bedroom wall . . .

Or the six names of artists in a group have first letters that spell another word . . .

FURTHER STEPS TO IMPROVED LEARNING

• Form study groups

• Spread study over the entire unit: don’t wait till the night before because YOU NEED A LONG TIME TO CREATE LONG-TERM MEMORIES AND LONG-TERM MEMORIES ARE NECESSARY FOR TESTS.

• Seek help if needed AS SOON AS YOU BEGIN HAVING TROUBLE: the teacher, other teachers, fellow students, and the ARC

• ASK THE ARC STAFF TO HELP YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR LEARNING STYLE and SET UP A GOOD STUDY PLAN FOR YOURSELF.
Finally, for all you visual learners out there, here’s a quick-look version of most of the information in this handout. Enjoy.