Becoming an Active Learner

By Terrill Saxon, Tracey Sulak and Tamara Hodges

Reflect on your high school study habits

Reflect for a moment on your study habits during high school. Write down a brief description of how you organized your study time. Some things to consider: Where did you study? Did you study at a desk, on a sofa or in bed? Was it quiet, or did you listen to music or have the TV on? Did you reread your books or notes? What sort of notes did you have? How much time did you spend studying? Did you consider the kind of test for which you prepared (e.g., essay or multiple choice)? Did you study alone or with friends? Now, what are your expectations for studying for college exams?

What does it mean to be an active learner?

Active learners pursue information rather than waiting passively for an instructor to “pour” information into them. Active learners attend each class meeting prepared to discuss the assigned materials. This means, for example, an active learner will have read before class, and in addition to reading the materials, the active learner will create questions and note main ideas. How do you know what to read? In high school, your instructor probably reminded you of the reading assignments for the next class meeting, but do not expect this in college. The course syllabus is very important since it serves as your guide for the entire course. Study your syllabus, and place assignment due dates on your phone or calendar. This way, you will know what to read even if you do not have access to your syllabus. Also, be sure to note the course requirements listed on the syllabus. You will be expected to complete all course requirements as stated in the syllabus and most of these requirements will follow a specific, stated format. The syllabus is your course roadmap, so use it to help you navigate through the course material.

What does an active learner do during class?

The active learner understands that Note-Taking is Critical! Some instructors will post lecture notes/power points online; download these before class and bring them with you to class; this will help you note what your instructor considers most important. One habit that is essential to helping you study well is developing a note-taking system. What do your notes look like? Are they organized? Make sure that you write down important information that your instructor discusses. The more an instructor talks about something,
the more likely it will be on your exam. Also, if you have questions about your notes, ask your instructor to clarify. Of course, to take notes effectively, you need to take paper and pencils to class (or a computer if your instructor allows), so always have your materials in a specific location in your room. This helps you remember to take them to class! After class, try to create concept maps or a graphic organizer of the information. You should reread your notes and fill in any missing information while the lecture is still fresh.

**The brain’s ability to organize, retain and process information**

Understanding how the brain organizes, retains and processes information can help you become an active learner. Storing information in long-term memory and retrieving it later can be tricky. Many learning theorists believe that long-term memory storage often involves a process of “construction,” whereby we must store the information (putting into our heads) properly in order to have a chance at retrieving it at a later time. Remember that newly acquired information seems to need some time to “firm up” in the brain’s cortex – a process called consolidation, so don’t wait until the last day to study. The following suggestions are ways to enhance transfer of information from short-term memory to long-term memory:

Nothing beats preparation, so make sure you **Study Every Day!** Students with good study habits do this and have better grades than those who try to cram it all in at the last minute. Make studying a regular part of your daily routine. For example, review your notes from the classes you have each day and look through assigned chapters from that day’s class. You will be more likely to remember the information you are taught, and when it comes test time, you will not feel overwhelmed with what to study.

Another important part of preparing for an exam involves finding out the format of the exam and then studying accordingly. For example, if the exam is multiple choice, you must be able to tell the difference between concepts that seem very similar, but if the exam is all essay, you need to be able to recall the main concepts and explain them in writing. For any exam format, you should spend time practicing the types of questions you anticipate. To do this effectively, create study time available divided by topics/content to be covered and concentrate on areas that are most important and where you feel the weakest.

After creating a plan, be sure to study in a quiet, organized, comfortable environment (not in bed). **Turn off the TV and your iPhone when you are studying!** Studying for a test is hard enough, make sure you limit the amount of distraction that is going on around you. **Study in a designated “study” area.** At your house, at the library, in a coffee shop...wherever it is...know that this area is your study space. Choose a space that does not have a lot of distractions.
**Re-Write Your Notes!** Do you ever feel like there is so much information covered in one class and you can never remember it? Well, you can! Take the massive amount of notes that you took in class and rewrite them in a way that helps you remember.

- Draw visuals (i.e., concept maps/graphic organizers) if that what works for you.
- Make sure to summarize the information by putting it into your own words.
- Make an outline of what is covered, or even make up questions on which you can quiz yourself.
- Verbalize the information to someone. Make sure to elaborate on the information, as if you are teaching it to someone else.
- Make the information meaningful by connecting it to facts that you already know.

Remember to do it regularly and consistently so you are getting everything you need from your notes in order to help you succeed!

When you feel ready, find a study partner or study group and teach each other the material. Teaching information to someone else requires you to know the material at deep level.

After you receive your grade on the exam, take note of what you did well and the areas that you could improve on for the next exam. Schedule a meeting with your professor if you have any questions or concerns about your performance. After reviewing your exam and meeting with your professor, make a list of “must remembers” for the next exam and then start planning for your next exam.

Terrill Saxon is an Associate Professor in Educational Psychology

Tracey Sulak is a Lecturer in Educational Psychology

Tamara Hodges is a Lecturer in Educational Psychology