An Experiment in Studying Smart

Sometimes with so much going on in our lives, it’s hard to find time to study! I know for me, having two jobs, taking 15 hours, and serving on the executive board of my sorority, makes finding the time and motivation to study difficult. That’s why for this week’s blog on intellectual health, I decided to share some study tips and try them out for myself! Hopefully this can make studying look a little less like a student dying (haha get it…) and a little more like us becoming the productive, motivated students I’m sure we all are!

1. Find your study spot.

My first study tip might sound simple, but it’s very important! To study effectively, you need to find a quiet and distraction free place to study. Whether this place is your room, an isolated cubicle in the library, or an empty classroom on campus it’s important to find a place which minimizes outside noise and helps you better able to absorb information quickly. On that note, it’s also important to decrease the amount of distractions you might be bringing into your study spot yourself. Try turning off your phone while studying or putting it on do not disturb mode. If this is hard for you try visiting uniceftappproject.org and download their app which allows generous donors to provide a day of clean water for children in need for every 15 minutes you don’t touch your phone. How great is it that by going without something far less vital than clean water we can provide others with something they need to live? Interruptions not only cause you to lose your train of thought but also prolong the time you will actually be studying (and I know no one likes that).

Think about it. Maybe it’s not your actual studying technique that’s bogging you down, but the place in which you study that is. I know everyone is different; many of my friends can’t stand to study in complete silence, while others (like myself!) can’t get any work done with even the tiniest pin drop of noise around them. Whatever this spot looks like for you, find it and stick with it. When you finally find a spot free of interruptions it will become easier to recall information you learned while studying when taking a test. This is because studying in a distraction free zone will ultimately help you think more clearly and better apply the knowledge you learned in a test taking environment.

This week I tried studying in
a library carrel and I can definitely attest to this fact! When finally taking my logic quiz, it was easy to recall all the rules I memorized to help me solve each problem. Reserve a study room or carrel here.

2. Don’t procrastinate

With so much going on in my life, I always have the urge to say “I’ll just do it tomorrow night” when it gets late and I finally start my homework for the night. However, what we don’t realize is that when we do this we’re actually hurting ourselves in the long run. Studies continually show cramming doesn’t work and studying a little each day will better prepare you to do well in school.

Not only will studying a little each day help you to do better in school, it also will decrease the stress and exhaustion you inflict upon yourself! Sounds like a win win right? Additionally, although I know it can be hard not to procrastinate when you get busy, sometimes making a plan can help. If you have a test on Wednesday, plan out what you will do to prepare for that test on Sunday night, Monday night and Tuesday night. That way when Tuesday night comes around, you won’t have to stay up all night to be ready for the test.

This will not only help you be more alert and awake for the test the next morning but also help you actually retain the information you learn in the long run. After mapping out how I would study for my logic quiz within the three nights before, I was able to effectively prepare for my quiz and get the 8 hours of sleep I needed the night before. This shows not waiting till the last minute to study definitely has its perks!

3. Find your study strategy
This is equally important as finding your right study spot! However to find the strategy that works best for you, you first have to know what kind of learner you are.

- **Visual learners** learn by seeing. If this sounds like you, writing out vocabulary and concept definitions, looking up models or diagrams online, and putting your notes in a visually appealing form (i.e. highlighting different concepts in different colors) may be strategies you should try.
- If you’re an auditory learner (like me) you learn by hearing. Talking with a friend about what you’re learning, listening to recorded lectures (be sure to ask your professor if he/she is okay with this first), or reciting information you need to memorize out loud may be strategies you should try.
- Finally if you’re a kinesthetic learner, you learn by doing. Finding ways to work with your hands when learning (i.e. using your fingers when learning information in list form), drawing diagrams or models to represent concepts, using flashcards (i.e. touching or moving flashcards around to show how concepts connect), and highlighting important points in your notes may be strategies you should try.

No matter what kind of learner you are, it’s important to find a strategy that works best for you in general. If you’re spending hours studying in a way that’s incompatible with how you learn, you’re only cheating yourself and making studying harder than it has to be. For me, because I’m an auditory learner I like to discuss what I’m learning with friends in my class. Discussing rules for different problems with my friend in general logic with me definitely helped in preparation for my quiz!
4. Test your knowledge.

It's often hard to know when you've studied enough. If you're preparing for a test, how do you know if you're really ready? If you just finished your paper, how do you know if it's just quite right? To answer these questions, part of your studying should be testing or applying the knowledge you just learned.

Having a friend quiz you on key concepts, utilizing practice quizzes in your textbooks, simulating a fake test yourself (ask your professor for old tests and set your timer for the amount of time you'll have in class), or visiting the writing studio to get a second set of eyes to edit your paper (setup an appointment here) can help you identify areas of weaknesses or gaps in your knowledge.

Once you know which areas you need help in, you know what to ask your professor about in class or in office hours.
and what you need a little more practice in. Especially for math and science classes, often times repetition is key to learning how to solve those tricky problems. Taking practice tests or being quizzed by a friend can not only help you identify areas of weakness but also serve as just the extra practice you need to eventually get better at what you’re struggling with!

After finishing studying for my logic quiz, I went back and did additional exercises I found in my textbook. This really helped me assess which areas I needed to go back and review and which concepts I still had questions for my professor about.

5. You are not your grade.

Lastly, and maybe most importantly, remember when studying is that in the end all you can do is your best! If you’ve studied to the best of your ability and still don’t manage to get the grade you want, it’s important to remember that your grade doesn’t define you. It’s not the end of the world and with the difficulty level of our classes at Vanderbilt you have to keep everything in perspective. At Vanderbilt, we’re receiving a world class education- so if you don’t get that A, it’s still okay and you still have a lot to be grateful for! It’s also important to reflect on what motivates you to study.

Is it the desire to genuinely learn or simply to the need to get an A?

If it’s the latter, maybe you need to rethink that. Studies show that it’s not external motivating factors (monetary gain, recognition, or getting that A), but intrinsic motivating factors (a true desire to grow, learn, and expand your
that are effective. Maybe it’s that need to get an A that’s the very reason you’re not doing as well as you think you should. When you decrease the pressure you put on yourself, focus less on getting an A, and more on simply learning the material, studying will become truly rewarding.