

# Study Skills

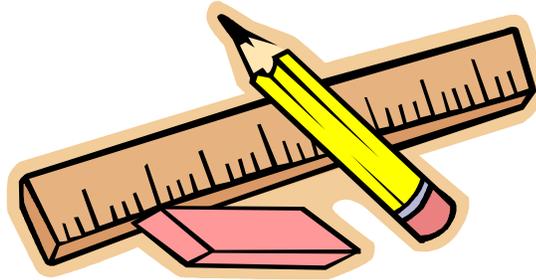
Information for Middle and High  
School Students, Parents and  
Counselors



Created by the Guidance Department at the  
Educational Leadership Center  
Orange County (FL) Public Schools



# Introduction



What are study skills? They are often referred to as “learning” skills. People skilled at learning get more out of their lives because they look for opportunities to grow and gain more knowledge. We live in a world that favors people who have skills and who are willing to learn new ones in order to gain new knowledge. If you have learning skills, you will not only get more out of what happens in school, you’ll be better equipped to meet your goals in life.

Learning or “study” skills also transfer to other areas of your life beyond school. Good listening skills, for example, help you in relationships with friends, other people at school and your family. The ability to solve problems or issues helps you in your personal (and later on in professional) experiences beyond school. You will use learning skills for everything you do in life.

Learning is a progressive process. As you move through your life, from kindergarten to teenager and into adulthood, you build gradually on your skills. Learning how to study or, learning how to learn, will benefit you for your entire life, in ways that go far beyond your report card grades. The skills you acquire will have a positive influence in all other areas of your life.

This booklet is especially designed for middle and high school students and contains suggestions for students, parents and schools that are designed to help the student get (more) organized, spend time more wisely and, therefore, improve grades. Each suggestion has withstood the test of time and should prove beneficial to all students. You are encouraged to use each strategy fully and to encourage others to adopt each one as well.

## Concerned About Middle and High School?



Students sometimes are concerned or anxious about the transition to middle and high school. The most common concerns are:

- Having time to get everything done
- Meeting new friends
- Being able to adjust to having many teachers
- Getting lost, finding the room for each teacher and getting to class on time
- Having stricter teachers
- Being the youngest student in the new school after being the oldest in the previous school
- Adjusting to being around so many students
- Knowing how to act and what to do in middle and high school
- Having difficulty talking to other students
- Feeling you might be pressured to do something you do not believe is right
- Having too much work

The solution? Ask questions of your family, friends, teachers or counselor. Just as with any change, you can expect the days at middle and high school to be different than they were at your former school. That does not mean necessarily better or worse, just different. In a few weeks you will have adjusted to the school differences and feel comfortable in your new school. It is an exciting opportunity to meet many new people from other places. Take advantage of this time to learn about different customs, traditions and events. The teachers at the school don't know you yet so, if making a new start is a goal of yours, this is the perfect chance to begin.

## Information for Students

Before beginning any process in learning study skills, it is important to remember a few important points. First is that there is no one right or wrong way to study. We are each individuals and each of us will find something a little different from others that works for us. Your study routine may differ from your friend's or from your sister's or brother's. The key is to try to figure out what works best for you and then stick with it.

Secondly, as the student, you are the person most responsible for doing your homework. This does not mean you cannot get help from your parents or your teachers or even from friends, but getting help does not mean that someone else should do the homework for you. It also does not mean you should have to be asked over and over to do your homework. Your parents have already been through school. Right now you are the one who is supposed to be learning the material.

For some students, when it comes to studying, if there is no pain, there is no gain, but it does not have to be that way. Your success in school is dependent on your ability to study effectively and efficiently. The results of poor study skills are wasted time, frustration and low or failing grades. There is no magic formula for success in preparing for tests, written or oral assignments. Studying any material requires work. By using the suggestions in this guide you can gain a valuable edge in understanding material, preparing for tests and ultimately, learning. Read the material, think about what you read and get ready to become a more successful student.



Are you having trouble studying for that test? Is it hard to concentrate on your homework? Do you go to class and not remember anything of what you studied the night before? Do you go completely blank as soon as the teacher passes the test paper around? Although there is no magic formula to get that "A" on your Math test, here are some tips that will send you on your way to doing well on your next exam. Be aware that knowing what effective study skills are is only part of the task. Implementing these skills in your life requires discipline and practice as well as strong motivation to make a change in order to succeed.

## STUDY TIPS FOR STUDENTS

- You won't do well if you never show up for class. **Attend class** every day even if your best friend does not.
- Take advantage of **tutoring or extra help** from your teacher. If you are struggling, this can make a huge difference.
- Set aside a **specific time** to study. Many students find it easiest to go home, have something to eat and then study right away. If you have other activities at that time that will interfere with this schedule, you will need to find what works best for you.
- Get into the habit of studying **every day**. If you do not have any specific assignments, take a few minutes to review topics that you find hardest. It is good to get into the habit of studying every day.
- Make a list of all the things you need to do. Divide the workload in to manageable blocks of time. **Prioritize your tasks** and stick to your deadlines. Usually it is best to do the hardest subjects first. Your brain is fresher when you first start studying.
- Study for **focused blocks of time** when you are alert. Study for 45-50 minutes then take a 5-10 minute break. This keeps you more focused.
- Create your own **quiet study space**. If you don't have a desk in your room or if the dining room table isn't quiet enough, consider going to the local library or going to another room in your home that has minimum distractions and good lighting.
- **Don't do other things** while you are studying. This includes watching TV, fixing a snack and talking on the phone. Occasionally, people claim they study better with music playing. This does work for some students. If it is only background music that does not make you tap your pencil to the beat, it might work for you.
- If you feel you are losing focus, **switch** the type of task you are working on, the subject you are studying or the place where you are studying. Some students take a quick break and walk around a little. Stop studying when you are no longer being productive.
- **Don't waste time** between classes or while riding the bus. Review your notes or make a note of any questions you have about the material.
- If you have a lot of reading to do to prepare for a test, **make notes** while you go along.
- **Ask for help** when you need it. Teachers and friends are usually willing to go over something with you again if you didn't quite "get it" the first time.
- Occasionally, **study with a friend**. Quiz each other, compare notes and discuss differences in your notes or your understanding of the material.

## Preparing for Tests

Usually test scores are the major factor in your course grade. Doing well on them requires test-taking skills, a purposeful positive attitude, strategic thinking and planning and of course, a solid understanding of the course content. Below are some tips to help you prepare for an exam.

- Familiarize your self with the test. Ask how long it will be and what kind of questions will be on it. Find out what concepts are most important, which chapters to study and what you will be expected to do on the test-write an essay, answer multiple choice questions, complete a chart, etc. Look over all the work to be done and schedule time to do it. Stick to your schedule and routines.
- Avoid the “escape syndrome.” If you find yourself worrying or talking about what needs to be done instead of doing it, relax for a few minutes and rethink what you are doing, check your priorities and if necessary refine your study plan and then start working.
- Read or skim and take notes on the material you have not yet read. Set time limits and stick to them. Emphasize key material and concentrate on understanding the ideas. Ask yourself questions about the material or have someone else do this. Review the material out loud. Self-testing at the end of each section can increase recall even without reviewing later.
- Review actively. Put together your notes, items from the book and other information you have about the material. Use charting, outlining, making tables or even writing summaries. Perhaps create summary sheets for each major concept and make them meaningful to you.
- Practice doing what you will be doing on the test. Anticipate test questions by asking, “If I were making up this test I might ask...” and then answer your own question.
- Consider studying with other well-prepared students. Studying together can clarify any gaps in what you know.



## Taking Tests

Do you get really nervous before a test? Maybe so nervous you don't do your best and lose points even though you studied and are prepared? Do you ever forget, during a test, material you studied and learned maybe only to remember it again later after the test is over? Do you make careless errors on a test? Do you spend a lot of time and energy studying and preparing for tests, yet fail to make grades that represent what you know? Do you lack confidence in yourself as a student because of this?

If you answered "yes" to several of these, you might be "test anxious." Of course, everyone is anxious about tests; if not, you wouldn't try. A certain amount of tension is good because it can act as a motivator.

On the other hand, many students suffer from nervousness so severe that two things happen – their grades drop (anxiety keeps them from doing their best) and the quality of their life lessens (they're miserable).

Here are some suggestions for ways to remain calm and keep a productive level of tension while taking tests.

- Be prepared emotionally and physically in addition to being prepared intellectually. Stay away from others right before the test; anxiety is highly contagious. Focus on what you know rather than what you do not know. Get enough rest the night before the test. Eat well balanced meals and exercise regularly. Prepare your brain by keeping your physical resources well maintained. Avoid fasting; don't take any stimulants, e.g., coffee or soft drinks, you are not used to taking.
- Arrive at the room early enough to arrange your area as best you can and establish a calm, alert mode.
- Find out if you can write on the test itself and, if so, after you receive the test, use the back to write down any information you might forget.
- Look over the whole test before trying to answer any questions. Make sure you have all the pages. Read the directions carefully.
- Plan your time. Use the most time on the questions which offer the most points and save time at the end for review.
- Start with the easy questions to build confidence and gain time for the more difficult questions. Try to finish the whole test. If there is no penalty for guessing, answer every question.
- Don't panic if you see a question you did not expect to see. Use everything you know to analyze the question and create a logical answer. Try for partial credit when you know you cannot get all the points.
- Read the question as it is written. Avoid oversimplifying or overanalyzing the question so you won't end up answering a question not on the test. Answer the question the teacher intended you to answer.

## How to Keep Calm During Tests

- A. Prepare well in advance. Keep up day to day, if you can; but don't put your self down if you can't. Avoid cramming right before the test. Don't go without sleep the night before. Stop studying an hour or so before the test to take time to relax and compose yourself.
- B. Know when and where the test will be given. Also, what you need to bring. Be on time with your books and supplies (pens, pencils, calculator, etc.) Don't rush.
- C. Don't talk about the test with classmates immediately before the test if doing so raises your own anxiety level.
- D. Read over the test and decide on your approach. Determine point values per question or section, the time limits for each part, which question you want to start with, etc.
- E. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification from the teacher if you have questions about directions, procedure, etc., rather than being unsure or anxious about what you are expected to do.
- F. Develop an aggressive, yet realistic attitude. Approach the test determined that you will do your best, but also accept the limits of what you know right now. Use everything you know to do well, but don't blame yourself for what you don't know.
- G. Activity reduces anxiety. If you go blank and can't think of anything to write, go on to another question or part of the test. For an essay question, write down anything you do remember on scratch paper or on the back of the test to stimulate your memory.
- H. Relax yourself physically during the test, if you notice that you are not thinking well. Pause, put your test aside and take several slow, deep breaths. Concentrate on your breathing. Do this if you notice you are worrying too much about one problem, not reading carefully or forgetting information you know.
- I. Pay attention to the test, not to yourself or others. Don't waste time worrying, doubting yourself, wondering how other people are doing, what question someone else is on, blaming yourself, etc. Don't worry about what you should have done; pay attention to what you can do now.

## Information for Parents



There is no single right or wrong way to study. Each child is an individual and each will find something different that works. Your child's study plan may differ from that of your neighbor's kids. If you are lucky, you may find that all your children can take the same approach to studying, but often that is not the case. The idea is to find out what works best for each child and then stick with it.

Keep in mind that the object of teaching your child how to study is just that. You are not trying to make sure they get great grades, although hopefully that will follow. You want them to learn to take the responsibility for getting their homework done. Naturally, it won't be that simple. Learning to study is a gradual process and you can expect some hurdles along the way. Work out a homework plan with your child and let them take more and more of the responsibility for carrying it out as time goes on.

Certain important practices will make life easier for everyone in the family when it comes to study time and study organization. However, some of them may require an adjustment from other members of the family.

- Turn off the TV set. Make it a house rule that whenever it is study time, it is "no TV" time. A television set that is on will draw your child's attention.
- What about the radio? Should it be on or off? Some youngsters do seem to work all right with the radio turned on to a favorite music station. The music should serve as background noise rather than be the focus of your child's attention.
- You will need to set rules about the family phone during study hours. You may need to place restrictions on the length of calls during study time. You may want to keep the phone available in case your child needs to call a classmate to confirm an assignment or to discuss difficult homework.

- Designate specific areas for homework and studying. Some suggestions are the child's room or the kitchen/dining room table. Eliminate as much distraction as possible.
  - A table that allows for all necessary supplies such as pencils, pens, paper, books and other essentials works extremely well.
  - Consider placing a bulletin board in your child's room
  - Encourage the use of a small book or pad for writing down assignments so there is no confusion about when certain assignments are due.
  - Have the typical school supplies on hand. Make it the child's responsibility to be well supplied with paper, pencils, note pads, notebook paper, etc.
- Consistency is a key factor in academic success. Serving meals at a standard time is helpful so that after eating and family discussions are over, it is time to study if that is the routine. Some students prefer to study soon after arriving home in the afternoon. Allow your child to take breaks, perhaps as a reward for finishing a section of the work.
- Organize study and homework projects with your child. Get a large calendar that has space to write things in daily boxes. If possible, consider tearing it so that one semester at a time is showing. Have the child use a marker to mark exam dates in one color, report due dates in another color, etc. This will also serve as a reminder so that your child does not procrastinate on assignments.
- Teach your child that studying is more than just doing homework assignments. Encourage your child to do such things as:
  - learn to skim material
  - take notes while reading a chapter
  - learn to make flashcards for quick review of dates, formulas, spelling words, etc.
  - learn to study tables and charts
  - learn to summarize what has been read in his/her own words
- Note taking is a critical skill and should be developed. Many students don't know how to take notes in classes that require them. Writing down every word is not necessary. Perhaps use an outline form of note taking.
- For some students rewriting notes, especially if a lot of material was covered, can serve as an excellent review. If notes are rewritten they should be used later for review and recall.
- A home dictionary can be valuable. Keep it in an accessible place and let your child see you refer to it occasionally. An inexpensive dictionary specifically for the student is fine. To use a dictionary, knowing how to alphabetize is essential. Try alphabetizing spelling words, relatives' names or favorite TV shows as a way to practice this skill.

- Help your child feel confident for tests. For some students, taking tests is traumatizing. Explain to your child that cramming the night before a test is not productive. It is better to get a good night's sleep. Remind the child to read the directions carefully and completely before beginning a test. Skip over questions for which they do not know the answers right away. They can return later if there is time. Always take an extra pencil or pen just in case.
- During study time, watch for frustration. No learning can take place or be accomplished if the child is angry or upset over an assignment that is too long or complicated. As a parent, you may have to step in and halt the homework for the night, offering to write a note to the teacher explaining the situation. You may want to talk to the teacher if this happens repeatedly.
- Should parents help with homework? Yes, if it is productive to do so, such as asking key questions or checking a math problem. No, if it is something the child can handle alone. Help and support should always be calmly and cheerfully given. Grudging help is worse than no help at all. Read directions or check over math problems after your child has completed the assignment. Make positive comments.
- How to handle report cards. Gently discuss from time to time "how is it going at school?" with your child. Questions such as, "How did your test go?" "How did you do on that report?" "How's your history project coming along?" are questions that are not third degree, but indicate interest. Find out if it is a policy at our child's school to send out "Warning notices" when work is not going well. If such notices are not sent, then grades on projects, tests and reports may be the only source of information other than what your child shares. Look out for statements such as "She's an awful teacher," "He goes too fast," etc. This may be your child's way of indicating frustration. Be cautious in contacting the teacher without your child's approval or interest. Doing so may disrupt good feelings between the two of you and make you seem to be interfering or spying.



## GENERAL HOMEWORK TIPS FOR PARENTS



- Make sure your child has a quiet, well-lit place where studying and quiet reading can occur. Avoid having your child do homework with the TV on or in places with other distractions, such as people coming and going. Monitor the use of the telephone and computer, including the Internet.
- Make sure the resources your child needs, such as paper, pencils and a dictionary are available. Ask your child if special materials will be needed for some projects and get them in advance.
- Establish a routine time for homework and special projects and allow for balanced leisure activities. Establish a set time each day for doing homework. Don't let the child leave homework until just before bedtime. Think about using a weekend morning or afternoon for working on big projects, especially if the project involves getting together with classmates. Help your child participate in activities outside of school also.
- Be positive about homework. Tell your child how important school is. The attitude you express about homework will be the attitude your child acquires.
- When your child does homework, you do homework. Show your child that the skills they are learning are related to things you do as an adult. If your child is reading, you read too. If your child is doing math, balance your checkbook.
- When your child asks for help, provide guidance, not answers. Giving answers means your child will not learn the material. Too much help teaches your child that when the going gets rough, someone will do the work for him or her.
- When the teacher asks that you play a role in homework, do it. Cooperate with the teacher. It shows your child that the school and home are a team. Follow the directions given by the teacher.
- If homework is meant to be done by your child alone, stay away. Too much parent involvement can prevent homework from having some positive effects. Homework is a great way for kids to develop independent, lifelong skills.
- Stay informed. Talk with your child's teachers. Make sure you know the purpose of homework and what your child's class rules are.
- Help your child figure out what is hard homework and what is easy homework. Have your child do the hard work first. This will mean he or she will be most alert when facing the biggest challenges. Easy material will seem to go fast when fatigue begins to set in.
- Watch your child for signs of failure and frustration. Let your child take a short break if he or she is having trouble concentrating on an assignment.
- Encourage games and leisure time activities that require reasoning, computations and problem-solving skills. Allow your child to participate in building things, fixing things, cooking and related tasks.

## Information for Counselors

Given the current emphasis on student achievement, counselors more and more are called upon to help students succeed. While individual counseling regarding success in school, study skills and test taking strategies can be helpful, time restraints necessitate the move toward using small groups as the best way to help the most students.

A pattern of poor school performance often begins to emerge by 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. To help, counselors (and parents) can look for the following indicators of someone at risk for school failure:

- Multiple retentions in grade
- Poor grades
- Absenteeism
- Lack of connection with school
- Behavior problems
- Lack of confidence
- Limited goals for the future

To reduce the potential failure rate, schools can implement a number of strategies, including, but not limited to:

- Improving communication between schools, e.g., elementary and middle and high schools, to help provide a continuum of instruction
- Offer a study skills program
- Hold a day for students to sign up for clubs, sports, etc.
- Use peer leaders for academic or social support
- Hold a day for younger students to shadow an older student
- Advisor/advisee programs
- After school tutoring
- Holding small cooperative study groups

Counselors are encouraged to work with other school staff to implement any of the above strategies to assist students having academic difficulties at school. In addition, the handout sheets provided in this packet (pages 5, 8 and 12) may also be copied and distributed to students and/or parents. Other suggestions for counselor-led activities include assisting students in developing a planned weekly schedule on which students keep track of how they spend their time each day, having students complete a study skills checklist (see page 14) or holding a study skills small group at your school. The Resource Library at the ELC contains more than 50 sources of support for middle and high school counselors which includes books, videos, notebooks and study kits.

## STUDY SKILLS CHECKLIST

Read each statement and decide if it applies to you. If it does apply, place a "Y" in the space. This checklist will help you find out about your study habits and attitudes.

1. \_\_\_ I spend too much time studying for what I am learning.
2. \_\_\_ I usually spend hours cramming the night before an exam.
3. \_\_\_ If I spend as much time on my social activities as I want to, I don't have enough time left to study, or when I study enough, I don't have time for a social life.
4. \_\_\_ I usually try to study with the radio or TV turned on.
5. \_\_\_ I can't sit and study for long periods of time without becoming tired or distracted.
6. \_\_\_ I go to class, but usually I draw, daydream or fall asleep.
7. \_\_\_ My class notes are sometimes difficult to understand later.
8. \_\_\_ I usually seem to get the wrong material into my class notes.
9. \_\_\_ I don't review my notes throughout the semester in preparation for tests.
10. \_\_\_ When I get to the end of a chapter, I can't remember what I've just read.
11. \_\_\_ I don't know how to pick out what is important in the book.
12. \_\_\_ I can't keep up with my reading assignments and then I have to cram the night before a test.
13. \_\_\_ I lose a lot of points on essay tests even when I know the materials well.
14. \_\_\_ I study enough for my tests but when I get there my mind goes blank.
15. \_\_\_ I often study in a haphazard, disorganized way under the threat of the next test.
16. \_\_\_ I often find myself getting lost in the details of reading and have trouble identifying the main ideas.
17. \_\_\_ I rarely change my reading speed in response to the difficulty level of the passage or my familiarity with the content.
18. \_\_\_ I often wish that I could read faster.
19. \_\_\_ When my teachers assign papers I feel so overwhelmed that I can't get started.
20. \_\_\_ I usually write my papers the night before they are due.
21. \_\_\_ I can't seem to organize my thoughts into a paper that makes sense.

If you answered "yes" to two or more questions in any category, ask a teacher or your counselor for help for those categories.

Time Management – 1, 2 and 3  
 Concentration 4, 5 and 6  
 Listening and Note Taking 7, 8 and 9  
 Reading 10, 11 and 12

Exams 13, 14 and 15  
 Reading 16, 17 and 18  
 Writing Skills 19, 20 and 21