

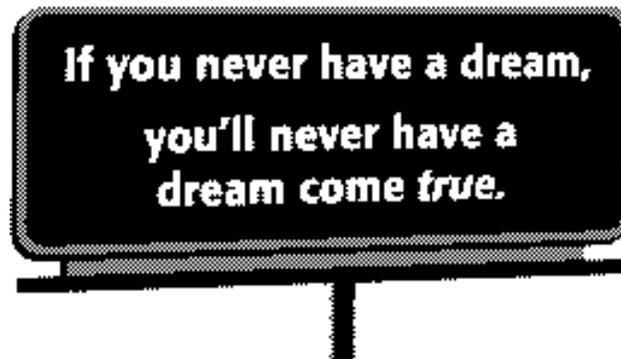
Three Keys to Doing Well in School

John Langan

Welcome to this minicourse. It will probably take you only a few minutes to read the material here. The advice, though, could make a major difference in your life as a student. You will learn about three essentials to student success: 1) your attitude about learning, 2) your use of study skills, and 3) your involvement with reading.

YOUR ATTITUDE ABOUT LEARNING

Several years ago, my wife and I were vacationing in New Mexico. As we drove into one small town, we suddenly came upon a huge billboard. I was so struck by what it said that I stopped our car and wrote down the words.



I think your starting point must be a dream inside you—a belief and resolve in your heart that you will use school as a step on your road to success. If you don't have the right attitude, you may be wasting your time in school.

I'm not kidding. Some students are just pretenders: they talk the talk, but they're not ready to walk the walk. The advice in this minicourse will help you "walk the walk" and succeed in your courses.

Respecting Yourself

Consider this basic truth about human nature: **we all want to respect ourselves.** We all want to live our lives in such a way that we think well of our behavior and others think well of us. We do not want to be disrespected or seen as bad people. An equally basic truth is that the only way we can get respect is to earn it. At a certain point in growing up, we realize that life doesn't give us something for nothing. What is important and meaningful is what we earn through trying hard and working hard.

- Take a minute to think about the following question: Imagine two people. One person has drifted unhappily through life, putting in a minimal effort at a series of jobs and maybe even at times living off others. One morning the telephone rings and someone says to this person, "Congratulations. You have just won a million dollars in the state lottery." The other person works hard and eventually earns a million dollars; that person is well regarded by others and has a strong sense of accomplishment and self-worth. Which person would you rather be—the one who *won* a million dollars or the one who *earned* a million dollars?

Chances are you would choose to be the person who worked hard, overcame obstacles, and achieved success. If you relate to that person, your attitude may be something like this: "I want to respect myself and have others respect me. To get this respect, I'm going to work hard to succeed. At this stage in my life, that means doing well in school because education is clearly a key to success." And if you've made mistakes in the past (and many of us have), your attitude should be: "I can change my behavior. I'm going to learn to work hard so I can get somewhere and be someone."

Doing the Work

You need to believe in the saying, "No pain, no gain." The only way to get self-respect and success is to work for them. When I was teaching full-time, I found that among the two hundred or so students I met each year, there was no way of telling at first which students had this attitude and which did not. Some time had to pass for people to reveal their attitude by what they did or did not do. What happened was that, as the semester unfolded and classes had to be attended and work had to be done, some people took on the work and persisted even if they hit all kinds of snags and problems. Others didn't take on the work or didn't

persist when things got rough. It became clear which students had determined inside themselves, “I will do the work” and which had not.

The heart of the matter is not the *speed* at which a person learns; the heart of the matter is his or her determination—“I *will* learn.” I have seen people who had this quality of determination or persistence do poorly in a course (often because of out-of-class problems or events), come back and repeat it, and finally succeed.

Through knowing such determined people, I’ve come to feel that the single most important factor for school survival and success is an inner commitment to doing the work. When the crunch comes—and the crunch is the plain hard work that school requires—the person with the commitment meets it head-on; the person without the commitment avoids it in a hundred different ways.

- If you have not yet taken charge of your life, the above paragraphs are the most important ones in the book for you. On the following scale of *Passive* to *Determined*, where would you rate yourself?



- Take several minutes to think about, or to discuss with others, why you rated yourself as you did. What are some of your strengths? What are some of the personal challenges you must overcome?

KEY STUDY SKILLS

Here are four important study tips that can make you a better student. The tips are based on my thirty years of experience working with first-year college students and teaching both reading and study skills.

TIP Tip 1: Take Lots of Notes in Class

The most important steps you can take to succeed in school are to go to every class and take a lot of notes. If you don’t go to class, or you go but just sit there without taking notes, chances are you’re heading for a heap of trouble. The most important steps you can take to succeed in school are to go to every class and take a lot of notes. If you don’t go to class, or you go but just sit there without taking notes, chances are you’re heading for a heap of trouble.

Yes—I have deliberately repeated the above sentences. That’s how essential the steps are. If I had only thirty seconds to speak to a student and offer advice, the above is the advice I would give.

I have interviewed hundreds of today's students who have said the same thing. Let me quote just two of them:

Ryan: "Attendance is as important as studying itself. So is taking notes. I take notes even in classes where they say you don't have to take notes. It's very easy to forget material otherwise."

Jhoselyn: "You definitely have to take a lot of notes. When the teacher is talking and you're just listening, everything is very clear. But you're just not going to remember it all. You have to get it down on paper."

- You may not realize just how quickly new information can be forgotten. For example, how much class material do you think most people forget in just two weeks? Which answer do you think is correct?

___ 20 percent is forgotten within two weeks

___ 40 percent is forgotten within two weeks

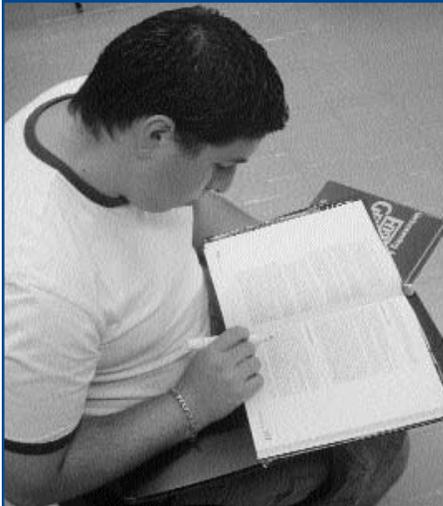
___ 60 percent is forgotten within two weeks

___ 80 percent is forgotten within two weeks

The truth is that within two weeks most people forget almost 80% of what they have heard! Given that fact, you need to get to class and take notes!

TIP **Tip 2: Know Which Comes First—the Textbook or the Instructor?**

Let me ask you a question: Which is more important—learning how to read a textbook or learning how to read your instructor?



You may be surprised at the answer: What is far more important is *learning how to read your instructor*—to understand what he or she expects you to learn in the course.

I remember becoming a good student in college only after I learned the truth of this statement. And I have interviewed hundreds of students over the years who have said the same thing. Let me quote just one of them:

“You absolutely have to be in class. Then you learn how to read the teacher and to know what he or she is going to want on tests. You could read an entire textbook, but that wouldn’t be as good as being in class and writing down a teacher’s understanding of ideas.”

 **Tip 3: Have a Textbook Study Method**

When I first began to teach study skills, I visited my students’ classes to get a good sense of what skills they really needed. I was not too surprised to find out that very often students did not have to read their textbooks to do well on tests. I had had the same experience in school: If I took good notes in class, I seldom had to read or study the textbook. The bottom line is that teachers will test you on the ideas they feel are most important—and most of the time those are the ideas they cover in class.

For those times when you do have to read and learn a textbook chapter, do the following.

- 1 First, read the first and last few paragraphs of the chapter; they may give you a good overview of what the chapter is about.
- 2 Second, as you read the chapter, look for and mark off definitions of key terms and examples of those definitions.
- 3 Third, as you read the chapter, number major lists of items. If there is a series of points and you number the points 1, 2, 3, and so on, it will be easier to understand and remember them.
- 4 Fourth, after you’ve read the chapter, take notes on the most important material and test yourself on those notes until you can say them to yourself without looking at them.

TIP **Tip 4: Organize Your Time**

Are you an organized person? Answer these questions:

- Do you get out of bed on time, and do you get to places on time?
- Do you have any trouble keeping up with schoolwork?
- Do you allow enough time to study for tests and write papers?

If you are not an organized person, you're going to have trouble in school. Here are three steps to take to control your time:

- 1 First, pay close attention to the course outline, or **syllabus**, that your instructors will probably pass out at the start of a semester. Chances are that syllabus will give you the dates of exams and tell you when papers or reports are due.
- 2 Second, move all those dates onto a **large monthly calendar**—a calendar that has a good-sized block of white space for each date. Hang the calendar in a place where you'll be sure to see it every day—perhaps above your desk or on a bedroom wall.

OCTOBER						
Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
			1	2	3	4
5	6 <i>English paper</i>	7	8	9 <i>Math test</i>	10	11
12	13	14	15 <i>History test</i>	16	17	18
19	20	21 <i>Math test</i>	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30 <i>Speech report</i>	31	

- 3 Third, buy a small notebook and write down every day a “**to do**” list of things that need to get done that day. Decide which items are most important and focus on them first. (If you have classes that day, going to

those classes will be “A” priority items. Other items may be a “B” or a “C” in importance.) Carry your list with you during the day, referring to it every so often and checking off items as you complete them.

- Look over the following “to do” list for one day. Label each of the items A, B, or C depending on what seems to be its level of importance.

To Do — Monday

1. *Go to History and English class.*
2. *Study for math test tomorrow.*
3. *Cash check at bank.*
4. *Meet Ben for lunch.*
5. *Check e-mail.*
6. *Pick up drinks and snacks for later.*

- Answer these questions:
 1. Of the three steps for organizing time, which is the most important one for you, and why?
 2. Which step is the second most important for you, and why?

YOUR INVOLVEMENT WITH READING

I can make my point here by asking you two questions:

1. What is the best way to learn how to become a good driver?
 - A. Study the driver’s manual.
 - B. Take a lecture class on how to drive a car.
 - C. Watch films of good drivers.
 - D. Sit in the passenger’s seat with a good driver.
 - E. Drive the car.

You know the answer. The best way to learn how to be a good driver is to *drive the car*. In other words, the way to become good at a skill is to practice the skill.

2. What, then, is the best way to become a better reader? Based on question 1, you can probably guess the answer.

The best way to become a better reader is to do a lot of reading. In this book, you will do a fair amount of reading at the same time you learn and practice key reading skills. All the reading and practice are sure to make you a better reader. It's like becoming a better driver: the more you drive, the better you become. The more you read, the better you become.

My Own Experience

In my experience, a lot of students come to college without having done much reading in their lives. I was lucky. Up until the end of my sophomore year in high school, I was not a reader. If I had to do a book report, I got a plot summary and slipped by. Then one idle summer day I saw a sign on a bus that said, "Open your mind. Read a book." I decided to read a book just to disprove the sign. I resented the suggestion that my mind was closed just because I did not read.

But here's what happened: When I read a book—*The Swiss Family Robinson*, about a family stranded on an island and having to survive until rescuers arrived—I knew in my bones that there was both pleasure and power in reading. I sensed that the more I read, the better off I would be, so I began to read a lot. I became an active learner, and it made all the difference. It is why I am now here writing to you.

A Question, and a Challenge

But enough about me. Let's get back to you.

- How many books would you guess you have read in your life?

I have had many students say they have never read a single book from cover to cover in their lives. At most they read a book or two in school, but their memories of such books are seldom pleasant ones. They often describe that reading as a kind of forced death march—a chapter at a time with lots of worksheets and quizzes. Such experiences are not true reading experiences.

- Are you willing to take on this challenge: To read at least one book outside of your classes?

A true reading experience would be to read an appealing story from cover to cover. To find a good story, you may want to choose one of the books in the Townsend Library or in *60 Good Books to Read*.

The important thing is that you give yourself a chance to develop a reading habit—for all the reasons shown on the next page.

The Heart of the Matter: Regular Reading

Many people believe that regular reading is the very heart of education. Here is what they say:

- 1 Reading provides language power.** Research has shown *beyond any question* that frequent reading improves vocabulary, spelling, and reading speed and comprehension, as well as grammar and writing style. If you become a regular reader, all of these language and thinking abilities develop almost automatically!
- 2 Reading increases the chances for job success.** In today's world more than ever before, jobs involve the processing of information, with words being the tools of the trade. Studies have found that the better your command of words, the more success you are likely to have. *Nothing will give you a command of words like regular reading.*
- 3 Reading creates human power.** Reading enlarges the mind and the heart. It frees us from the narrow confines of our own experience. Knowing how other people view important matters helps us decide what we ourselves think and feel. Reading also helps us connect with others and realize our shared humanity. Someone once wrote, "We read in order to know that we are not alone." We become less isolated as we share the common experiences, emotions, and thoughts that make us human. We grow more sympathetic and understanding because we realize that others are like us.

Regular reading can, in short, change your life. It can open the door to a lifetime of pleasure as well as learning. But you must be the one to decide whether to walk through that door.