

ADAPTED FROM:

How to do Really Well in College

A Guide for Freshmen



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SUNY Oswego Honors Program

1. GO TO CLASS

Probably the most basic thing you can do to thrive in college is go to class. Go to all your classes. Every day. Pretty obvious, huh? But you'd be amazed at how many students don't do it. I take attendance, but my colleagues who don't tell me that they always have large numbers of students who just don't attend, students with ten or more absences in their courses every semester. And then, they tell me, these students can't understand why they don't do well!

2. PAY ATTENTION

OK, you're in class every day. Now what? Well, being there is better than not being there, but being there and paying attention is better still. Listen to what the professor says; think a bit; take notes. I don't really need to explain why paying attention in class is a good thing, do I? I mean, if you've gone to all the trouble of going to class, you might as well be part of it, as long as you're there anyway.

3. STUDY

Obviously. The big question here is: How much should you study? Well, I've heard two rules of thumb. One rule says you should spend two hours studying outside of class for every hour you spend in class. If you have 15 hours of classes a week, you should plan on 30 hours of studying a week. If you study five nights a week—leaving yourself two nights a week for, uh, relaxation—that's six hours of studying a night.

The other rule was my father's. (He gave me a lot of advice before I went to college, some good, some bad. This one proved to be rock solid.) College is your job...A job takes 40 hours a week. If you spend 15 hours a week in class, that leaves 25 hours a week that you should be studying—because it's your job. (My father also used to say that if I didn't like the job of going to college, I could always quit and find another job.) So, during five nights of the week, spend five hours of studying a night.

4. FOLLOW THE RULES

This means that you hand in your assignments on time. Not a day late; not an hour late; not after class if they're due in class. On time. If your professor says no hats in class or no chewing gum, remove your hat and your gum before coming to class. If your professor holds office hours only on Mondays from 2 to 4 p.m., go on Mondays from 2 to 4; he or she won't be there on Tuesdays. If your professor wants your papers typed, type them. If your professor wants your report on green paper, do it on green paper...When you follow the rules, it makes your life easier—for example, no lowered grades because of missed deadlines—and it makes your professor's life easier. Easier means un-hassled. Un-hassled professors mean un-hassled students.

5. READ

Read your assignments, of course. As important, read the newspaper. Read magazines. Read mysteries. Read science fiction. Read romance novels. Read anything, but read.

Read the *New York Times*. Read the *Wall Street Journal*. Read *USA Today*. Read *Newsweek*. Read *Time*. Read *Sports Illustrated*. Read *People*. Read Michael Crichton. Read Stephen King. Read Tom Clancy. Read John Grisham. Read Danielle Steele. Read anything, but read.

Reading for pleasure—a contradiction in terms for some people, I realize—has a number of benefits, most of them unintended. First, you learn a lot of information by reading for pleasure. Second, you learn how to write well by reading for pleasure. Although John Grisham isn't Ernest Hemingway, most people who get published for a living write better than the rest of us. By reading a lot, you soak up good writing, clear writing, polished writing, concise writing, effective writing.

6. LOOK AT YOUR GRADES

All through the semester, your professor is giving you grades. In some courses, you get a grade as often as every week; in some you get a grade only at mid-semester and at the end; still others fall somewhere between these two extremes. (I'm told that some professors give students no indication of their progress during the semester. If by about mid-semester you have no idea how you're doing, ask your professor. If you don't get a satisfactory answer, see your Dean immediately. [By satisfactory answer, I don't mean that you necessarily like your grade, but that your professor did give you an idea of how you're doing rather than an "I don't know."]) Whichever is the case, you do get grades periodically, and you need to pay attention to them and understand what they mean.

Here's a conversation of the sort I've had many times over the years with students.

Me: How are you doing in math?

Student: Pretty good.

Me: How good is "pretty good"?

Student: B-, C+.

Me: Have you taken any tests in math yet?

Student: Yeah.

Me: What were your grades?

Student: Uh, a C- and two Cs.

Big news now: a C- and two Cs are not pretty good nor do they average out to B-/C+ . I find that most students tend to overestimate their grades, because they think they'll pull it out at the end. While this is admirably optimistic, many students assume it will just happen. You need to be realistic about what your grades mean in order to do something about them

7. PICK A MAJOR YOU LOVE

Or at least like a lot... You won't excel at something you don't enjoy. You'll be unhappy, your work will be a struggle, and your grades will be mediocre. The mere fact that you get a degree in something doesn't guarantee you a job in that field. You'll be in competition with a lot of people who love the field, who excelled in it, and who got great grades. Who's an employer going to hire: the passionate person with a 3.5 GPA or the unhappy camper with a 2.6? (And if you don't love it as a student, what makes you think you'll be able to stand it as a job?).

8. BE AN ACTIVE PART OF YOUR EDUCATION

Far too many students are the passive recipients of education—empty vessels, so to speak. Teachers pour the information in, and the students pour the information back out when they have to. They never process it; they never think about it; it just passes through. And that seems to be OK for many students. They're just not interested in putting much effort into their education... They take undemanding classes, do as little work as they can get away with, and take whatever grades they happen to get. They don't seem to care. (And a large number of them flunk out eventually.) Will they get jobs when they graduate? Sure, but probably not the jobs they want. As I've said before, a 3.6 beats a 2.4 every time.

9. BE NICE TO SECRETARIES

It always amazes me how many students are rude to secretaries, janitors, and office staff. This is dumb. They are the gatekeepers to the world. They decide who gets in to see the Dean or the Department Chair and how long it takes to get that appointment. They can give you the help you need right away—or they can simply follow the rules and keep your life on hold forever. Be rude or nasty to them, and you'll never get their help. And you will need their help sometime. Remember, they don't make the rules; they don't even necessarily agree with all the rules they have to enforce. Hey, the lady in Financial Aid isn't the reason your loan didn't come through on time. Yell at her and she'll just shrug and say, "I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do." Want her to help you? Be nice to her and she might be willing to make a couple of phone calls on your behalf. Act like a jerk, get treated like a jerk. Act like a *mensch* (if you don't know what it means, look it up), get treated like a *mensch*. Remember, everyone else is rude to these people. If you're the smiling, understanding ray of sunshine in their day, they'll feel better and you'll get treated better.

10. REMEMBER: YOU ARE NOT ENTITLED

Your professors have very few obligations to you. They are obligated to teach you their subject the best way they know how. They are obligated to show up at the appointed time, clean and sober, and teach the subject you signed up for. They are obligated to tell you at the beginning of the semester what the rules of the course are. They are obligated to stick to those rules. They are obligated to evaluate you fairly. They are obligated to make themselves available for a reasonable amount of time outside of class to provide you with help.

They are not obligated to be nice to you. They are not obligated to be your friend. They are not obligated to entertain you in class. They are not obligated to be around every time you'd like them to be.

You are entitled to the best education we know how to give you. You are entitled to our courtesy and our fairness. You are not entitled to anything else. Anything you get beyond that you need to earn. If you want favors from your professors—and understand: anything beyond those few simple things is a favor—be nice to them. If you want favors from clerks, secretaries, maintenance staff, RAs, residence hall directors, deans, whoever, be nice to them. That's not just the way it is in college; that's the way it is in life.