Tips for Doing Well in Psychology Courses

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Being a student of psychology offers you the opportunity not only to study the material taught in your various classes, but also to apply and take advantage of the wealth of information the field of psychology has to offer: information about the teaching–learning process, memory and retention, time management, test preparation, and numerous other areas that can help you succeed in your academic endeavors. In this last installment of his three-part series, Dr. Landrum has mined a wide variety of sources and gleaned some of the best tips available for student success. Psi Chi thanks Dr. Landrum for partnering with us to offer these valuable articles, and we encourage you to read all three, which are available on Psi Chi’s website (www.psichi.org). May you experience great success in applying your psychology as well as studying it!

A S YOU READ THIS ARTICLE, you will notice that most of these tips to help you do well in psychology courses are tips that will help you do well in college, whatever your major. When giving study tips, it is difficult to separate out time management from test preparation from study distractions—they all seem to relate to one another. Hopper (1998) offers these 10 tips for surviving college:

• Try not to schedule back-to-back classes. You’ll wear yourself out, and you’ll miss some of the best times to study—right before and right after class.
• Be a student starting with the first day of class. Don’t take the first two weeks of the semester off—even if your classes are off to a slow start. If possible, try to get ahead on reading so you’ll be able to keep up later in the semester.
• Establish a routine time to study for each class. Studying means more than just doing your homework. Studying involves general organizational and planning strategies (finishing assignments early, organizing notes), task preparation strategies (literature reviews in library, rereading textbooks), environmental restructuring (finding the right place to study, minimizing distractions), processing/recall ability (memorizing), and typical study strategies (taking notes, studying notes; Schwartz & Gredler, 1998). Prepare for each class as if there will be a pop quiz.
• Establish a place to study. Make your study place a place with minimal distractions.
• Do as much of your studying in the daytime as you can. Nighttime brings more distractions for adults.

Part Three of a Three-Part Series on Career Options and Strategies for Psychology Majors

• Schedule breaks. Take a brief break after every block of study time. Try to avoid long blocks of studying unless that is your optimum method of studying. Don’t be unrealistic in how long you can study—that is, don’t schedule an eight-hour study session for Saturday afternoon and evening if that is something that you just won’t do when the time comes.
• Make use of study resources on campus. Find out about the opportunities for tutoring, study sessions, test review in class, etc. Ask questions in class of your professors. Another benefit of asking questions: it slows down the lecture, and gives you a chance to catch up. Ask a question even if you know the answer.
• Find at least one or two students in each class with whom you can study. A fellow student might be able to explain a concept better than your professor, and in terms that you can understand. Also, you might feel more comfortable asking questions of another student, and you’ll have an opportunity to observe another person’s study habits. Try to study with students who are academically equal to or better than you: they will stimulate and challenge your abilities.
• Study the hardest subject first. Work on the hardest subjects when you are fresh. Putting those subjects off until you’re tired compounds their difficulty.
• Be good to yourself. Take care of your other needs—physical, emotional, social, financial, etc. If you can minimize other concerns in your life, you can use your efforts to study and understand the subject matter.
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<td>1. I spend too much time studying for what I am learning.</td>
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<td>2. I usually spend hours cramming the night before the exam.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
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<td>4. I usually try to study with the radio or TV turned on.</td>
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<td>5. I can't sit and study for long periods of time without becoming tired or distracted.</td>
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<td>6. I go to class, but I usually doodle, daydream, or fall asleep.</td>
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<td>7. My class notes are sometimes difficult to understand later.</td>
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<td>8. I usually seem to get the wrong material into my class notes.</td>
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<td>9. I don't review my class notes periodically throughout the semester in preparation for tests.</td>
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<td>10. When I get to the end of a chapter, I can't remember what I've just read.</td>
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<td>11. I don't know how to pick out what is important in the text.</td>
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<td>12. I can't keep up with my reading assignments, and then I have to cram the night before a test.</td>
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<td>13. I lose a lot of points on essay tests even when I know the material well.</td>
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<td>14. I study enough for my test, but when I get there my mind goes blank.</td>
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<td>15. I often study in a haphazard, disorganized way under the threat of the next test.</td>
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<td>16. I often find myself getting lost in the details of reading and have trouble identifying the main ideas.</td>
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<td>17. I rarely change my reading speed in response to the difficulty level of the selection or my familiarity with the content.</td>
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<td>18. I often wish I could read faster.</td>
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<td>19. When my teachers assign papers, I feel so overwhelmed that I can't get started.</td>
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<td>20. I usually write my papers the night before they are due.</td>
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<td>21. I can't seem to organize my thoughts into a paper that makes sense.</td>
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**How to score the results**—Look at the categories below that correspond to the questions in Table 1. If you answered yes to two or more questions in any category, you might want to concentrate on that category.

- Items 1, 2, 3 — time scheduling
- Items 4, 5, 6 — concentration
- Items 7, 8, 9 — listening and note-taking
- Items 10, 11, 12 — reading
- Items 13, 14, 15 — exams
- Items 16, 17, 18 — reading
- Items 19, 20, 21 — writing papers

**Study Skills**

Many students enter college unprepared or underprepared for the academic challenges ahead. The strategies that worked for you previously may not be effective now. In fact, you may find that different college classes, even different psychology classes, may require different study strategies. The following information is designed to give you some tips on how to improve your study habits, improve your reading, get more out of lectures, and improve your test-taking skills.

**Students Are Different.** Techniques and strategies that work for one student may not work for another. Some students claim that they do not study at all! You need to concentrate on what you know, and you need to discover what works and does not work for you. The studying process involves a complicated sequence of behaviors. Table 1 presents a Study Skills Checklist by McConnell (1998) that can give you some insight into different types of study skills.

**Time Management**

Writing your schedule down helps to make it concrete and allows for time management. Time management is even more important if you have many other
responsibilities (like working, family, sports). Here are some tips for time management:

- Set aside times and places for work.
- Set priorities, then do things in priority order.
- Break large tasks into smaller ones.
- Plan to do a reasonable number of tasks for the day.
- Work on one important task at a time.
- Define all tasks specifically (e.g., not “write paper”).
- Check your progress often.

Once you develop your basic schedule, add school events (exams, papers, presentations). Sticking to a schedule can help you to avoid cramming and procrastination. Cramming isn’t a good study idea, because it strains your memory processes, drains you of energy, and exacerbates test anxiety. When people are faced with a number of tasks, most of us do the easy things first, saving the harder tasks for later.

Improving Your Reading

Much of your study time is spent reading. To be successful, you need to actively think about what you are reading. Highlighting the boldfaced terms isn’t enough. A very popular reading system developed by Robinson (1970) is SQ3R, which divides the reading task into these steps: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review.

1. **Survey.** Before reading the chapter word for word, glance over the topic headings and try to get an overview of the chapter. You will know where the chapter is going.
2. **Question.** Look at the chapter headings. Turn the headings into questions, questions you want to be able to answer when finished reading. If the heading is “Auditory System,” ask yourself, “How does the auditory system work?” If the heading is “Multiple Personality Disorder,” ask, “What are the characteristics of multiple personality disorder?”
3. **Read.** Now you’re ready to read the chapter. Your purpose is to answer the questions you just asked. If you finish reading and haven’t answered your questions, go back and reread.
4. **Recite.** Once you know the answers to your key questions, recite them out loud to yourself *in your own words.* Personalizing these concepts will help you later when you are tested. Once you’ve said them, write them down.
5. **Review.** When you are finished with the entire chapter, test your memory by asking yourself the key questions. Try not to look at the written answers.

Practice the SQ3R system and you will find you have developed a method for successful studying. SQ3R works because the reading assignment is divided into more manageable portions.

Getting More Out of Lectures

Lectures can occasionally be boring and tedious; however, poor class attendance is associated with poor grades. Even if the instructor is disorganized, going to class helps you understand how the instructor thinks, which may help you to anticipate exam questions or assignment expectations. Most lectures are coherent and understandable, and accurate note taking is related to better test performance. Here are some tips on improving your note-taking skills:

- You need to listen actively to extract what is important. Focus all attention on the speaker, and try to anticipate meanings and what is coming up.
- If the lecture material is particularly difficult, review the material ahead of time in the text.
- Don’t try to be a human tape recorder. Try to write down the lecturer’s thoughts *in your own words* (as much as you can). Be organized even if the lecture isn’t. Practice determining what is important and what is not (sometimes instructors give verbal or nonverbal cues).
- Ask questions during lecture. You can clarify points you missed and catch up in your notes. Most lecturers welcome questions and often wish students weren’t so bashful.
- If the lecture is fast paced (or if you are a slow note-taker), try to review your notes right after class if possible. Consult with a fellow classmate to make sure you didn’t miss anything important. You may want to form a study group to regularly review lecture materials and/or textbook readings.

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He is a member of the American Psychological Association, the Midwestern Psychological Association, the American Society for Training and Development, the Idaho Academy of Science, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and is a Fellow of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology (Division Two). He recently completed his two-year term as national president of the Council of Teachers of Undergraduate Psychology.
Improving Test-Taking Strategies

Your strategy should depend on the type of test you’re taking. Most students study differently for a multiple-choice test compared with an essay exam. One myth about multiple-choice tests is that you should go with your first answer and not go back and change answers. Research indicates that this is incorrect, and that 58% of the time students changed wrong answers to right; 20% of the time students changed right answers to wrong; and 22% of the time students changed a wrong answer to another wrong answer (Benjamin, Cavell, & Shallenberger, 1984). Here are some general tips for test-taking situations:

- Pace yourself. Make sure that when half the time is up, you’re halfway through the test.
- Don’t waste lots of time by pondering difficult questions. If you have no idea, guess (don’t leave a question blank). If you think you can answer the question but need more time, skip it and come back later.
- Don’t make the test more difficult than it is. Often simple questions are just that—simple.
- Ask a question if you need clarification.
- If you finish all the questions and still have time, review your test. Check for careless mistakes.

Behaviors to Avoid

This article has focused on providing tips for better performance as a psychology major. The article ends with a modified list of behaviors that tend to irritate professors—their pet peeves about students (Whiz, 1995). This somewhat humorous, somewhat serious list might give you some ideas about how to avoid getting on the bad side of your professors—these are valuable tips for success in any course.

Student Behaviors to Avoid In and Out of the Classroom (Or, What Professors Don’t Want to Hear From Their Students)

- Are we doing anything important in class today?
- Can I be excused from class this week? I have a friend coming to visit.
- I don’t understand why I got such a low grade. I really enjoyed the class and thought that you liked me.
- I don’t understand why I got such a low grade. I came to class every day.
- I’ve been trying to reach you all week. You are never in your office.
- If I had more time, I could have done a better job.
- Do you take points off for spelling?
- (One week before project is due)— I can’t find any articles in the library. Can I change my topic?
- Didn’t know there was a test today. I wasn’t in class when you announced it, and I never look at my syllabus. Do I have to take it now?
- Do class presentations count toward my final grade?
- I hope this class ends on time.
- Which of the assigned readings will be on the test?
- I can’t make it to class today. I’m working on a paper for another class and it’s due tomorrow.
- That’s not what Professor Smith said about that.
- (During the week before finals)—What can I do to get an “A” in this class?
- Did the syllabus really say that?
- Does my paper have to have a Reference section?
- Does the paper have to be typed? Why? Are you sure?
- I missed the last class meeting; did we do anything important?
- Will we be responsible for everything covered in the book and in the class?
- Why did I have to read all this if it wasn’t going to be on the test?
- (After the exam is handed out)—I don’t feel good. Can I take a make-up exam?
- I forgot the time of the exam. Can I take it now?
- I’m not doing well in this class. Can I do some extra credit work? (See below.)
- There is nothing written on the subject. I looked for a book in the library and couldn’t find one.
- I missed class last week. Can you tell me what happened?
- It’s not fair. I wasn’t in class when you gave the assignment.

Again, please remember that the listing consists of statements and questions that professors do not want to hear from their students. Years ago on the Internet I read about an instructor’s reply to a student who asked for extra credit. When asked for extra credit, the professor replied something like this: “Since you are having such a difficult time in keeping up with the regular class assignments, it would be cruel and heartless to give you even more, extra work to do on top of the work you are struggling with now.”

Given that argument, it’s hard to see a logical reason for adding more work to the students’ workload.

I hope that you have enjoyed this three-part series on majoring in psychology. It has been my pleasure and privilege to write for Eye on Psi Chi. My special thanks go to Dan Bockert for his encouragement and patience with the articles in the series.

References


In case you missed the first two articles of Dr. Landrum’s three-part series on “Career Options and Strategies for Psychology Majors,” you can read them on the Psi Chi national website: www.psichi.org/content/publications/home.asp

Part One (Fall 2001 issue): “I’m Getting My Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology—What Can I Do With It?”

Part Two (Winter 2002 issue): “Maximizing Undergraduate Opportunities: The Value of Research and Other Experiences”