

The 14 Habits of Top College Students

What makes some college students successful while others—well, less so? Sometimes it's a question of intelligence or insight. And sometimes it's sheer good luck. But a lot of the time it's a question of good habits: things you do on a regular basis that set you aside from the hordes of other, more scattered, students. In the hopes of separating the sheep from the goats, we present the following fourteen habits of top-notch college students. You'll find that these folk:

1. **Have a schedule.** Not only do they know when the tests and papers fall in the semester, but they have a good sense of what work needs to be done each week as the semester progresses. Nice and balanced: everything in gear and no worries come exam time.
2. **Divide up the tasks.** Readings get broken up into manageable chunks (not two hundred pages in one sitting). Quizzes and tests are studied for over the course of a week (not at 3 a.m. the night before). And paper ideas start gestating when the assignment is handed out (not the day before it's due, when you can barely formulate an idea, much less think through an issue).
3. **Are organized.** It's impossible to do any real work when you don't have the tools for the job: a working computer with the right software, a fast Internet connection, a good printer, and, for some courses, a thorough knowledge of how to navigate the course Web page and the university and library portals. Not to mention the basic materials of the course: a full set of lecture notes, the textbooks and articles, and, of course, all the course handouts and assignments.
4. **Hang out with smart friends.** Successful students know that spending lots of time with friends who don't even know what courses they're taking—or why they're in college at all—can create an atmosphere so toxic that any attempts to do well immediately wither and die. Pick your cohorts as carefully as you pick your courses.

6. **Don't kid themselves.** For instance, when you think you're studying, but you're really tweeting about how you barely survived your bonfire-jumping last night. Or when you're alternating between reading the e-article and checking out your friend's Facebook page every eight seconds or so. You're the easiest person you know to deceive. Don't.

6. **Manage their feelings.** It's difficult to excel in a course if you're feeling inadequate, bummed out, or doomed to fail. Students who know how to focus on their own positive achievements—rather than on what they got on the quiz that counts for about 2 percent of the course grade—have a leg up on the rest.

7. **Challenge themselves.** Good students are intellectually energetic. When they read, they think actively about what they're reading. When they go to class, they don't just veg out or text. On tests, they pounce on the questions and answer them directly and fully (this distinguishes their work from their colleagues trying to BS their way through the question). And on papers they look for deeper levels of meaning and more nuanced points—always a hit with the professor.

8. **Are consistent—and persistent.**

Tired or hung over? "I'm still going to make it to that 9 a.m. lecture."

Late-night review session? "Like the owl, I do my best work at night."

Difficult problem set? "I'll get these right if it kills me."

Three-hour final? "I'll stay to the bitter end. Maybe I can touch up my essay and collect a few extra points."

9. **Are open to feedback.** While it's easy and more fun to toss away your graded papers and exams, or conveniently forget to pick them up, the best students carefully study the comments and go over any mistakes they've made. And when the next piece of work rolls around, they take another look at the previous set of comments to see if there are any mistakes that they can correct on the new piece of work. All without feeling wounded or defensive.

10. **Ask when they don't understand.** Look, you've got a mouth. So when you don't get something in the reading, in the lecture, or in the homework, ask someone who might know. Like the prof or TA, for example.
11. **Aren't too shy.** Sure, everyone feels intimidated about having to seek out the professor (or even the TA) to talk about their own work. But keep in mind that most professors *enjoy* talking with students and, if asked, will offer loads of help on papers, preparing for tests, and even finding topics for future work—say, a junior project, senior thesis, or internship or collaboration. (See “The 15 Secrets of Going to See the Professor” on pp. 129–133 for our very best tips on how to approach the Man [or Woman].)
12. **Look out for Number One.** While some students are willing to blow off a week of school to satisfy the needs of others—for example, a demanding boss during busy season or an Uncle Fred who schedules his third wedding two days before finals—good students know that college is their job and make doing well their highest priority. Especially during the college busy season—the last month of the semester, when those big-ticket items like the term paper and the final exam roll around, and two-thirds of the grade is won or lost.
13. **Keep themselves in tip-top shape.** It's difficult to do well if you're sick as a dog, haven't slept in a week, or are loaded up on some substance. Successful students manage their physical and emotional needs as carefully as they do their academic needs.
14. **Have a goal—and a plan.** The best students know why they're in college and what they need to do to achieve their goals. You can't do well if you don't know what you're doing—and why.