

10 Tips for Getting Good (Or Better) Grades

By Professor Randall S. Hansen

As a college professor, I am often asked for my advice on how students can get better grades. And after a couple of years of refining my ideas, I have developed these 10 tips. And by the way, these tips will work for you -- whether you are a first-year student or a senior, whether at a small college or a large university. These tips are universal. So, if you are struggling with grades and interested in raising your grade point average, take a close look at these 10 tips for getting better grades.

1. Attend All Your Classes

Now you might think this was an obvious one. But I speak from experience when I say that many students skip classes for one reason or another. But if you want good grades, there are several reasons why you should attend all your classes:

- Absorb classroom material. Even if the professor follows the textbook pretty closely, sitting in the classroom and listening to the lectures/discussions will help you absorb the materials.
- Make presence known/participate. One of the benefits of going to college should be that you form a mentoring relationship with some of your professors, and that's not going to happen if you don't attend the classes. And often faculty have participation points (or bonus points), so beyond just attending, make an effort to be involved in the class discussions.
- Earn attendance points. Many professors have attendance policies, so you can have a direct impact on your grade simply by attending.

Don't forget to sit close to the front -- historically, those who do are usually the best students.

2. Master Your Professors

Every professor has a different personality and system for running his/her classes, so it makes sense as early in the semester as possible to learn what the professor wants. Here are some ways to master your professors:

- Understand course expectations. Most professors give out a class syllabus during the first week of classes -- and it is your responsibility to know deadlines and all the requirements for the course.
- Understand professors on a personal level. Rather than viewing the professor as some figurehead at the front of the class who decides your fate in some abstract way, get to know your professor as a person. Visit him or her during office hours, or stay after class.
- Communicate with professors when you are struggling. Especially at larger colleges and universities, the professor won't know when you are struggling, so if you are having problems with the course work or the tests, schedule an appointment to meet with the professor and get the help you need.

3. Get/Stay Organized

You may have been one of the lucky few who has never needed a planner before, but college is all about multitasking, and you can easily get overwhelmed with due dates, team meetings, and other demands on your time. Here are some tips for getting organized:

- Use a planner or other organization system. I've had my day-planner for years and cannot go anywhere without it. Others are that same way with their personal digital assistants.
- Stay current with due dates/course calendars. It's not enough to have a system -- you have to use it! So once you have some sort of system, get in the habit of using it (and it will soon become second nature).
- Keep homework, tests, and class papers in central location. Don't just throw old homework assignments or tests in the back of your car or the floor of your dorm room. You'll need these for

studying for future tests, for meeting with your professor to discuss them, and for figuring your grade in the class... so, keep all your class materials in a central location.

4. Use Time Wisely

Even if you do not procrastinate and are the most organized person in the world, time can be one of your biggest enemies in college. Here are some tips for using time wisely:

- Tackle harder work first. Yes, tackle the harder stuff first so that you are sure to have enough time to complete it. You'll feel a greater sense of accomplishment completing the work in this order.
- Take breaks as reward for work. Reward yourself for completing a major task by taking a break and chatting with a friend or watching some television. Not only are the breaks good motivation to help you complete something, you'll also be more refreshed to tackle the next bit of work after a break.
- Break larger projects into smaller, easy-to-accomplish pieces. If you have a massive term paper due at the end of the semester, break up the work into smaller chunks and assign deadlines to each part.
- Do not overextend yourself; learn to say no. Besides all your academic work, you will also be asked to get involved in all sorts of clubs and organizations while in college -- and at some point, you will have to learn to say no to some requests of your time.
- Work hard to play hard. One of my favorite students used to say that she worked hard so that she would have the time to play hard -- and that's a good balance. Just make sure you do the work FIRST.

5. Become "Noteworthy"

Another reason for attending class is recording the class notes. These notes are vital clues to what the professor thinks is the most important material for you to learn, so besides taking notes, learn how to better use them to your advantage. Here are some specifics:

- Be an active listener in class. Don't read the newspaper, gossip with friends, or text your roommate during class. Instead, listen attentively and actively -- and ask for clarification when you need it.
- Take good notes in class. Whether taking notes from scratch or following a professor's outline, the key for you will be to get the most important details down so that you can refer back to them when you need them.
- Rewrite or organize notes on your computer outside of class. This suggestion may sound a little extreme, but the writing-to-learn literature shows that you can increase your understanding and retention of material by rewriting it.

6. Use the Textbook

Professors assign textbooks for a reason -- and it's not to make you broke; it's to supplement the lectures and discussions from class. Do buy all the textbooks -- and follow these tips for using it:

- Read all assigned material. Sounds obvious, right? When a professor assigns a chapter, read the whole thing (unless told otherwise), including the opening vignettes, the case studies, and tables and exhibits.
- Know what's critical. At the same time, know what parts of the text are most critical. For example, in one of my classes, the vocabulary is most critical, and the textbook emphasizes the point by having all the terms and their definitions printed in the margins of every chapter.
- Use an outlining system to help comprehend material. Reading and highlighting the material in the text is just the minimum. To get the most of what you're reading, you should also take notes and outline the material.

7. Follow Good Rules of Writing

Many classes require one or more writing assignments, from short responses to term papers, and you'll do better on these assignments if you follow these rules of good writing:

- Organize your thoughts before writing. Stream of consciousness works in a diary or journal (and may have worked in high school), but it's best to map out an outline before you start the actual writing.
- Understand requirements for paper. Every professor has a specific way he or she wants a paper organized, and it's best to know them before you start to write. Be sure to understand the reference system and all the mechanics of the paper (font, margins, cover sheet, footnotes, etc.).
- Write a draft (and get feedback when possible). Especially for larger papers, you'll have a higher quality paper (and a better grade) if you can show the professor a draft early enough before the deadline to make changes.
- Rewrite, edit, rewrite, edit, rewrite. Learn that editing and rewriting are your friends. No one is a good enough writer to whip out the final draft in one sitting. The best writers go through a process.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread. Spellcheckers catch spelling errors, but not other problems, so learn the art of proofreading. Or better, have a buddy system with a friend in which you proofread each other's papers.

8. Study, Study, Study

Another obvious one here? Perhaps, but the rule is you should be spending at least three hours outside of class for every hour in it. And for some classes, you'll find you need a lot more time than that to master the material. So, here are some suggestions:

- Study early and often. Breaking your studying into shorter periods of time will make it less of a chore -- and give your mind time to absorb the material before moving on.
- Develop and practice good study habits. Make it a habit and studying will become second nature to you.
- Know how you best study, learn material. Some people need complete silence to concentrate while others like a little noise. Find what works for you and stick with it.
- Study with friends to gain support, but... don't turn it into a social event. A study buddy can be a great tool, as long as you actually get some studying accomplished.
- Make sure work is done before socializing. Studying is critical to learning, which is critical to better grades -- so do the work before heading out to have fun.

9. Be a Good Test-Taker

Just about all college classes have exams, and sometimes the exams are the major portion of your final grade, so it's important to become a good test-taker. Here are some hints:

- Know what to expect on exams. Every professor has a style of test development, so obtain old copies or ask the professor directly. Know the types of questions that will be asked -- as well as the content that will be covered.
- Read questions carefully and plan answers. Take your time at the beginning of the test to read through all the instructions and make a plan of attack.
- Pace yourself so you have plenty of time to complete all parts. And know the point values of questions, so you can be sure to complete the most important ones first in case time does run out.
- Ask questions. If you don't understand something, or need clarification of the question, ask the professor. Don't wait to get the exam back and find you answered a question the wrong way.

10. Polish Those Verbal Communications Skills

Many classes include a presentation component, so use these tips to improve your verbal communications skills and maximize your grade:

- Practice speeches, presentations. The best speeches and presentations are the well-rehearsed ones, so complete your script or outline early enough to have time to practice the presentation (and to make sure it falls within the specified time limit).
- If using technology, always have a back-up. Technology is great, but sometimes it fails. If you have a PowerPoint presentation, make copies of it as a handout in case you need it.
- Know the presentation situation -- and plan accordingly. Every professor has a set of guidelines when grading presentations and many classroom set-ups are different, so know the situation before going into the presentation.

Following these guidelines should help your grades immensely, but here is one other tip. Remember to think of your professors as your allies, not your enemies. And if not your allies, at least your partners. Our goal is for every student to learn and master the materials in the course. And if you master the materials, you should have a good grade in the class. And if you're struggling with some aspect of the course, just go see the professor. They're here to help you become the best you can be.