

How to Succeed in Class (this one or others!)

Here are some methods/behaviors/strategies that have worked in the past. Some are obvious (though no less effective); others may be new to you. At least scan through all of these once .. you may discover something useful to you.

If you have additions, suggestions or feedback regarding this list, please let me know.

- Don't skip class. Be there! .. and that means more than just showing up to fill your seat. Be on time, do not show disrespect to others. You also miss the overview for what will be covered in that particular lecture, and important announcements. If you must miss class, get notes from a classmate. Come prepared (i.e., have read the assigned material and know what to expect in class) – this way you are in a much better position to ask good questions.
- Note taking - Try to pick out the main ideas, but don't try to write down everything your teacher says. Be selective – you aren't a human stenography machine, nor should you feel compelled to act like one. You can always fill in the details. Being able to figure out what is important is a crucial learning skill. Relying overly on other people's notes is not nearly as effective as using your own (and the active learning that takes place during note taking)

In other words "Don't Lose Sight of the Forest for the Trees" .. keep an eye on the grand scheme of things and how the material fits together. Talk to classmates or your instructor about this.

- Sleep. (but don't overdo it :-) and never in class!!) Your brain doesn't work very well if it has to concentrate on basic tasks such as keeping you from bumping into furniture, or not pouring orange juice onto your cereal, never mind processing new information.
- Prime time. When is your prime time? When does your brain work best? Use that time to tackle difficult subjects/concepts/tasks. For me early mornings are the best time to solve problems - find out when you work best and exploit that time.
- Come to office hours prepared. Come with specific question and be prepared to tell what you have already tried (so that we can spend time productively with things you haven't thought of yet).
- Study with others, talking things over is a great help. Quiz each other. Can you explain the main concepts in your own words? Make a "*We definitely have to know this stuff*" list -- and concentrate on what you have determined to be the important material. If you like, show your list to your instructor for feedback.

However, while working with someone, be sure you gain an understanding of the material so that you can “deliver” later on your own. Be sure to do your own work. There’s a fine line between working together and not doing your own work - be sure you don’t slip across it accidentally.

- Teach someone .. it’s amazing how much you can learn by teaching someone else about the things you know. There is no better way to deepen your own understanding. (One of the reasons I love teaching)
- Learn from someone .. have a friend explain something to you that you weren’t able to quite get from the book or class. Different people have different ways of explaining, this may be the one you need.
- Check out and read/scan more than one book! Every author has his or her own style; the assigned text may not mesh with yours. Sample others. Make a trip to the library (that big building on campus filled with books!) and find other books on the topic you are learning about. Perhaps another author can explain something to you in a way that seems more intuitive. Google your way to more information, however be aware that anyone can post to the internet, so you should read the information found there especially critically.
- Really read your textbook .. scribble notes/clarifications all over it, highlight important ideas/concepts. Active reading will help you retain information better.
- Don’t wait until the last minute to do the work. At the very least read the assignment carefully the day you get -- that way you will have a clear idea what’s expected and there won’t be last minute surprises of the bad kind. Better to ask for clarifications etc about the assignment early.
- Learn to depend on yourself. What does this mean? Try to find out information on your own before relying on others. It’s ok to ask for help, but you will only disappoint your potential helpers if they find out that you didn’t do some footwork of your own first. I.e., look in your notes, books (including the index), assignment sheet, man pages, or the internet (as examples) before asking for help. Misuse your helpers this way a few times, and your helpers will be gone. Treat them as a valuable resource they are - use them only for times when you are really stuck - and they will be happy to help you.

Being able to ferret out information on your own will come in handy at 3am when no one is around to help. It feels good to be able to find out things on your own.

- Practice .. if you are in a programming class write lots of tiny programs to get the mechanics of the language down. The worst place to have to figure this out is during an exam, or when you are pressed for time. You may not always have references handy, so get a handle on the material.

- Consider getting a tutor. In some instances you can qualify for free tutoring. Your instructor may be able to help you find one.
- Participate in class.
- Proof-read your work. You should try to make a good impression with all of your work. Misspelling words doesn't make you look cool. Trust me.
- Take responsibility for your own work. If you turn in something late or poorly done, and therefore lose points, take your penalty and do not expend time and effort "arguing" for more points or special treatment. Try to concentrate on doing better next time.

If you have some methods/strategies/tricks that work well for you, please let me know.