Developing College-level Study Skills

The transition from high school to college-level classes can be extremely difficult to make if you don’t have the proper study skills. You need to be self-motivated and organized in order to succeed in college, and many courses will demand an extra investment of time, energy, and thought. The following tips can help you to be prepared for class, study and learn more effectively, and perform better on papers and exams. Remember, learning requires your active involvement—you can’t learn without doing!

Getting Answers to Your Questions

Your instructors in college will expect you to take the initiative in getting help when you need information or assistance. You will find that you can locate the answers to many of your questions on your own, whether they concern homework, understanding class material, doing research, or even registering for classes and finding your way around campus. It’s simply a matter of using the resources around you!

Remember to make use of the following resources:

- **Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference books.** If you don’t know the meaning of a word used on an assignment or in a class reading, look it up in the dictionary! If you need to better understand a term or a concept in order to complete an assignment or prepare for class, look it up in an encyclopedia or reference book! A number of different reference materials can be found in the library and the librarians who work there are happy to help you use them. You may also find online resources such as Google helpful in accessing basic facts and information about various subjects.

- **Blinn’s web site.** This site offers a wealth of useful information, including important dates on the academic calendar, college policies and student handbook rules, instructors’ contact info, and information about majors and how to choose the classes you need. You can search the site or access its quick links in order to find the information you need.

- **The Learning Center and Writing Center.** These centers, which are available to all enrolled students, are here to help you with assignments and course material through one-on-one tutoring and handouts. Your fees have already paid for these services, so make use of them early in the semester and often throughout.

- **Your instructor.** Visiting with your instructor one-on-one may be intimidating, but office hours provide a great opportunity to ask questions that may not have been addressed in class. You can also get a lot of clarification on assignments and more extensive feedback on your own work. Remember, your instructors are here to help you!
Using Your Textbook as a Resource

As the semester goes on, you may find yourself feeling overwhelmed with homework assignments, exams, and papers, so it’s easy to get out of the habit of reading your textbook and thinking of it as a learning tool that has helpful information for you. It’s important to learn how to use your textbooks as resources, as your instructors will expect you not only to understand what you read in your books, but also to find information in them as necessary for assignments and exams. You will find your textbooks a lot more useful through doing the following:

- **Use the table of contents** at the beginning of the book to find info on particular topics. The titles and page numbers of each chapter, and often subject headings for those chapters, are available in the table of contents. If your instructor has omitted information on which page a chapter begins or which chapter covers a particular topic, you can find out for yourself by using this tool.

  Also, many textbooks include a table of contents at the beginning of each chapter. This is a great tool for studying because it will help you understand the relationship between major concepts before you begin to read.

- **Use the index** at the back of the book to find out which pages discuss a particular topic or concept. An index is an alphabetical list of the topics covered in the book. For example, if you need to learn how to format a business letter and you have a copy of *Handbook for Writers*, you can use the index to discover that this information can be found on page 742.

- **Use the glossary** at the back of the book to get the definitions of terms that you may not be familiar with. For example, if you need to better understand what a metaphor is, you can look it up in the glossary of your literature anthology.

- **Be sure to read for meaning** when you do your reading assignments for class. It’s easy to fall into a lull as you read, and you may often find yourself passing over the pages without processing or retaining any information. As you read each paragraph, quiz yourself on the main point or idea that it covers; make sure that you understand this before you continue to read. You can also review the previous chapter before beginning a new reading assignment so you will understand the connections between ideas. Pay attention to any terms that are defined, making certain that you understand these before you move on as well.

- **Go back and scan for specific information** in your book in order to review, make study sheets, or simply to double-check what you think you know. Most textbooks use headings, sub-headings, and bolded text in order to organize the information they present.

Taking Notes

In order to learn and retain the material your instructor covers in class and you read in your textbooks—and in order to perform well on tests and quizzes—it’s important to take notes, both in class and as you read.
As you listen to your instructor’s lectures, be sure to write down the key points, particularly any information that they repeat, emphasize, or write on the board. Don’t be afraid to raise your hand and politely ask instructors to repeat information if you did not catch it the first time; they shouldn’t mind, as long as you aren’t doing this constantly. You may also want to visit your instructor during office hours to ask about any missing information or about info in your notes that you don’t understand. Remember, even if you have written it down, it doesn’t do you any good if you don’t understand what it means.

It’s also important to take notes as you do your textbook reading assignments. Although you already have this information at your fingertips, since you own the book, taking notes while you read will help you process and retain the information. Highlighting or underlining key definitions or useful points can help you later when you scan your book chapter for specific information. You should also work on taking notes in your own words as you read; putting the textbook information into terms that make sense to you helps you to test your understanding of the material and to properly digest it.

Organizing Your Work

Managing the workload for your classes can be difficult in college, especially because instructors often only give final project deadlines and test dates rather than breaking them down into assignments or review sessions. It’s vitally important to manage your time by doing the following:

- **Make schedules** for completing weekly reading and homework assignments, as well as for studying for quizzes in exams. When you only plan to do it “sometime this week,” the work often doesn’t get done. Using a weekly calendar/planner, budget specific blocks of time for each assignment you need to finish.

- **Break down big projects into smaller steps**, and then schedule specific times for completing each step. This will make the assignment seem more manageable, and it will also help you to give yourself plenty of time to think through the assignment and do your best. If you are working on a big research paper, budget separate blocks of time to choose your topic, do research, write your thesis statement, outline your paper, write a rough draft, revise your paper, work on grammar and punctuation, and complete the works-cited page. When you think about the research paper in terms of a series of steps, you can be more realistic about the amount of time it will take to do a good job.

- **Treat college like a full-time job.** Plan to spend at least eight hours a day working on school assignments and going to class. If you have a part time job, you may not be able to do that every day, but find a time that works for you. If you work evenings, then plan to spend 8am to 5pm on school. Stick to your schedule and you will find less need to work on weekends, and you will be sure to get your work done.

Scholarly vs. Popular Sources

As you work on papers and other projects, you will find it necessary to research. In order to find the appropriate sources to support your work, and in order to find the most accurate and
authoritative information to cite, you need to understand the difference between scholarly sources and popular sources.

- **Scholarly or academic sources** are journals, books, and other texts that have been written by experts in particular field or profession (literary studies, agricultural economics, or psychology, for example) for other experts in that field. The surest method for locating scholarly sources is to use the Blinn Library catalog and online databases. You can talk to a librarian to get help with using these resources.

- **Popular sources** are magazines, newspapers, books, and web sites that have been written or produced by people who are not necessarily experts in the field and that are intended for a broad audience full of laypeople (non-experts). *Newsweek, Time* magazine, and newspapers such as the *Houston Chronicle* or the *New York Times* are popular sources, because their intended audience is any literate adult rather than a specific group of professionals. Web sites such as CNN.com are also popular sources. This does not mean that popular sources are completely unreliable, but be cautious. If your instructor requires that you use a certain number of scholarly or academic sources, these sources will not apply.