



College Unpacked

A Practical Guide to
Choosing, Preparing
For, and Excelling In
College

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Book Preview
Chapter Six

Thriving in Your Classes

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Chapter 6

Thriving In Your Classes

All of the preparation and mapping is important to success on your academic journey, but at some point you have to head to class and get the work.

Setting Yourself Up For Success on Your First Day

We might as well start with the very first day. After all of the moving in and getting settled and welcome activities, classes are going to start. Starting well is a key component to being successful at any task. This is particularly true of your classes as the patterns you establish early in the semester will tend to persist throughout. So when it's time to start classes . . .

Get some sleep the night before. You want to be awake and ready for your first day. You're going to have a lot of information coming at you and you want a brain that is alert and ready to receive it. You have your whole college career to stay up too late. For the first few days, go to bed.

Figure out where you're going before the first day. There is something to be said for walking around campus with confidence on your first day because you know where your classes are. Take a few minutes during some down time after you move in to find your classes on the campus map. It's even better to physically walk your campus and find them, if you have a chance.

Read your syllabus ahead of time if it's available. I heard you roll your eyes at this one, but seriously, it will only take you a few minutes to read through the syllabi for your courses and this will give you a head start on the information that will be presented on your first day. It may also generate questions you'll want to ask about in your first class.

Show up early. Planning to get to class early gives you a buffer if something goes wrong with campus transportation or you get stopped by a slow crosswalk or you can't quite remember where your classroom is. When you make it early, you'll also have a chance to pick out the perfect seat where you'll probably end up sitting all year as we tend to be creatures of habit.

Bring some way to take notes. Even on the first day you'll probably want or need to take notes. I get a laugh out of watching students scramble on the first day for a pen and paper or to open up the note app on their phone because they weren't ready to have to know anything on the first day. Come ready to learn.

Meet a couple of people in each class. Oh my dear introverts, I just heard you say "no way" - I'm with you, but introducing yourself to the people around you will help you begin to form connections with peers you'll be spending considerable time with in class and may help you find study or group project partners for later on in the class. On my first day as a freshman, a girl in my class introduced herself to me. Three and half years later, we got married. I'm not saying you'll meet your future spouse on the first day of class, but I'm not NOT saying that might happen.

Establish hearing your voice in each of your classrooms on Day One. There is something about hearing the sound of your own voice in a room and establishing that room as a place where you feel comfortable talking. I know that sounds strange, but I've observed it over dozens of classes. Students who speak in class on the first day (other than just saying "here" when roll is called) seem to be more comfortable talking in class as the semester progresses. I do a couple of different things on the first day of every class to get students used to talking in the space. If your professor doesn't do that, make an opportunity for yourself - ask a question or start a conversation. But after the first day, you have to keep going to class, so . . .

Succeeding in Classes

Every student is different. Every professor is different. Every class is different. While no set of actions or mindsets will guarantee success in every course situation, there are a general set of principles that will serve you well. I give these to my students at the beginning of every course I teach. Following these does not guarantee an A, but making them your regular practice as you engage your coursework will help you get the most from your courses and set you up to do your best in them.

Get organized: Your course has a syllabus. That syllabus should have a list of everything you will be doing and turning in over the course of your term or semester. It should also have a schedule of due dates. When you get this document from all of your classes (many will be available before the first day of class), sit down with a calendar

(or app or just a big piece of paper you can make lists on) and write down all of the due dates. You are going to notice some patterns and some overlap - weeks where a lot of things are due and weeks where there isn't much. Spend some time strategizing how you are going to accomplish everything that has to be one over the semester. Have two papers due on the same day? Which are you writing first and how far out are you going to start? Multiple exams during midterms? What will your study schedule look like?

Putting these things on your calendar as appointments to be kept will make you more likely to actually do the work at these times. You might not keep every one of them, but keeping most of them is going to help you avoid trying to get it all done at the last minute. Even if you are a master procrastinator, at some point we all get caught trying to do too much in too little time. Save yourself that stress. Get organized.

Show up: Is this obvious? Yes. Do students struggle with it? Also yes. Can I sound like your dad for a second? Learning is the point of going to college and a lot of that learning happens in the classroom. It's not just what you hear from your professors, it's also the opportunity to interact with your peers around the content and ideas of the course.

Showing up also demonstrates your commitment to the class and won't go unnoticed. This commitment could come in handy if you run into a problem in the course. Odds are good that things will get adjusted over the course of the semester or that information will be presented in class that you can't get anywhere else. Showing up sets you up to succeed.

Do the work: This is another obvious one, but you would be surprised (or maybe you wouldn't) by how many students don't get it all done and then come looking for extensions at the end of the semester. Assignments are structured to help you learn and apply the content of the course. Skipping out on some (or many) inhibits that learning. Will some of it feel like busy work? Maybe, but even that work can reinforce concepts and strengthen your understanding.

By the way, "doing the work" includes reading and reviewing the assigned materials for the course. Engaging these materials gives you vocabulary, context, and understanding to better appreciate and participate in the conversations that take place in class. I'd love to tell you that all of it will be relevant and that none of what you read will be repeated in class, but neither of us is that naive. Part of owning your learning is taking responsibility and using everything you've been given to learn all you can. Do the work.

Engage: Learning is not a passive endeavor. Choosing to be an active participant in your courses is one of the most important things you can do as a student. In face to face classes, this means being prepared when you walk in the door, engaging in classroom conversations, and participating with your peers in group conversations and projects. Even in a class where all the professor does is talk (sadly, you will probably have a few of these), you can be active in taking notes and raising questions about things that interest you or that require clarification.

In the online space engagement can be more complicated, but most online courses have discussion boards and other collaborative opportunities for students to connect with each other and the professor. If you're in an online class, use these collaborative spaces to ask questions, bring up additional points, and share insights from your experience and understanding of the content.

Years ago, I had a student in a social problems class who was genuinely interested in the topics and asked me about something or pushed the conversation forward every class period. I loved it and it led to some important conversations among the entire class, not just the two of us. As you engage with the course, you can be a catalyst that takes the class in deeper directions and you will significantly increase your own learning.

Ask questions: I'm an introvert. As a student, I did everything I could to keep the spotlight off of me in class. If I didn't understand something, I tried to figure it out for myself. I can probably count on one hand the number of times I asked a question in my undergrad courses. That's not a good way to do education. I know there are things I don't know because I didn't ask about them when they were presented. If something doesn't make sense, ask. If an instruction is unclear, ask. If you're curious about something that was said, ask. And if you just can't bring yourself to ask with others around, catch your professor before or after class or during office hours or via email. Don't leave things unknown. Ask.

Textbooks

There isn't any way to sugar-coat this, so I won't. The world of textbooks is a mess. There isn't space here to get into all of the reasons why, but ultimately the mess comes down to money. Textbook companies want you to buy their books and you become a captive audience when your professor assigns one for your class. But I'm here to help, not preach, so here are a few things related to textbooks that are worth keeping in mind.

Get the required books for your class: This should go without saying, but I can't tell you how many students I've had through the years who didn't believe me when I told them they would need the textbook and then got caught short when they needed it. Your textbook is a source of information and preparation for the class. You may be expected to specifically use it to complete assignments and in many cases, everything you need to know for a quiz or exam is in those pages. Get the book. Read the book. It's worth it.

Automatic Purchasing: Many schools have an option that will automatically purchase your books for you, charge your account, and make them available (usually in digital form) in your LMS or on another platform. This is a great way to make sure you get your books and have them ready for the first day of class, but it can be more expensive and you can't always control the costs. Some automated purchasing allows you to select used books if available and may also have rental options, which are less expensive. Be sure to explore all of the options available to you if your school has an automatic purchasing system. There is also usually a way to opt out if you wish, but you might have to look for it.

Textbook Access Codes: Many of your classes will require an access code that you have to buy from the bookstore or the publisher. These codes give you access to content provided by the publisher, often on another site that you access from your LMS. The most important thing to keep in mind with these codes is that your professor should provide you with the information for your specific course within the third party site so you can connect to the right place. The access code will usually include a digital copy of the textbook, but a physical copy will cost extra.

Rent books: Another lower-cost option is to rent textbooks for the semester. Again, there are different platforms where you can do this and the same things to keep in mind apply. Also, check the rental dates to make sure you will have the book all the way through your class and know when to return it on time to avoid late penalties. Renting books is great for a lot of classes, but consider purchasing books for your major courses as they might be helpful in later courses or your future career or graduate school.

Buy used books: Used books are a great way to save money. There are a lot of different platforms to find used books and many large institutions have physical stores either on or just off campus where used books can be purchased. When you buy used books, keep a couple of things in mind:

- *Make sure you are buying the right edition of the book.* Your syllabus should include a date or edition number (it will say something like Intro to Psychology, 13th ed. Or you can check the ISBN). It's important that you have the correct edition as earlier editions will have different information or have the chapters in a different order (or missing altogether).
- *Pay attention to the delivery date.* Some online used booksellers can take two or three weeks to get books shipped, which means you could be well into the semester before you get access to the book.
- *Pay attention to the condition of the book.* Online sellers will tell you if the book is in good or fair or damaged condition. They aren't always truthful, but you'll want a copy that isn't falling apart.

Academic Integrity

There is a conversation raging across education about academic integrity. Every day a new tool designed to help students find shortcuts emerges and the next day there's a new tool for faculty to use to "catch" them. This is a wildly unhealthy approach from both sides. It's not new, we just have better technology now to play the game. Can I offer you a bit of advice? Don't play it.

You are paying to learn. It's why you're going to college. There may be other elements that are a part of the reason you are there, but the purpose of an educational institution and your attendance at it is for you to learn the things you need to learn to function in whatever field you choose and as an educated member of society. Taking shortcuts on class expectations diminishes your opportunity to learn, defeating the purpose of going to college in the

first place. Also, if taking shortcuts becomes a habit (and it is quite habit-forming), you may find yourself without the tools needed to accomplish what you need to when shortcuts aren't an option.

You are going to have professors who make it easy to take shortcuts in their class. You are going to have professors who do not care if you take shortcuts in their class. But then you are going to have professors who care very much and have made it their mission to catch and punish students who do it. The problem is, you may not know which kind of professor you are dealing with until it's too late. I've had plenty of students in my office appealing academic misconduct allegations and their ultimate argument is some version of, "I've done it in other classes and didn't get in trouble, why am I in trouble now?" - this is not a winning defense. Academic misconduct can carry consequences that impact your grade in a particular class which, in turn, affects your GPA. Additionally, multiple infractions can get you removed from the institution. Some schools have a one-and-done policy where a single incident of academic misconduct can cause you to be expelled.

You get the idea. Have integrity in your coursework. Understand things like plagiarism, especially in the use of citations, and be aware of ethical and unethical uses of AI and large language models. If your school or professor has a policy on AI usage, understand what it is and do your best to steer clear of disallowed uses. It may take longer to get things done. It may be harder. But it's the work you are there to do.

You will spend the bulk of your productive time (and some unproductive time) in some form of academic work. Whether you're in class or studying or doing homework, it's important that you give this academic pursuit the attention and effort needed to do your best. There may be days you don't feel like messing with it and days where it feels too hard. Give yourself to the work, and give yourself grace and rest along the way. It isn't easy, but it is worth the struggle.