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The Study Skills & Strategies Guide

ACADEMIC SKILLS GUIDE

How to study smarter, retain more, and build the habits that carry you through high school, college, and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

Most Students Don't Have a Study Problem

They have a strategy problem.

The students I work with are not lazy. They're not unmotivated. Most of them are putting in real time — they're just putting it in the wrong places, or in ways that feel productive but don't actually stick.

Rereading notes three times feels like studying. Highlighting an entire chapter feels like engaging with the material. Spending four hours the night before a test feels like preparation. But none of those things produce durable learning. They produce familiarity — and familiarity is not the same as understanding.

This guide is about closing that gap. It covers the study strategies that actually work — the ones backed by cognitive science and refined through thousands of hours of real coaching sessions. It's not about studying harder. It's about studying in a way that respects how your brain actually learns.

Who This Guide Is For

High school students building study habits for the first time. College students who need to level up. Parents who want to understand what effective studying actually looks like. Anyone who's ever thought, "I studied for hours and still did badly on the test."

SECTION 1

How Students Actually Learn

Before we talk about what to do, it helps to understand why the default approach fails. Most students rely on passive strategies — methods that create the feeling of learning without the actual retention.

The Illusion of Fluency

When you reread your notes, the material starts to feel familiar. Your brain interprets that familiarity as understanding. Psychologists call this the "fluency illusion" — and it's the single biggest reason students are surprised by poor test performance.

The test is: can you recall and apply the information without looking at it? If the answer is no, you haven't learned it yet. You've just recognized it.

Passive vs. Active Strategies

Passive (Low Retention)	Active (High Retention)
Rereading notes or textbook	Self-testing from memory (no notes)
Highlighting or underlining	Explaining concepts in your own words
Copying definitions	Creating connections between ideas
Watching a lecture passively	Pausing to summarize and predict
Cramming the night before	Spacing study over multiple days

The difference isn't effort. Students using passive methods often spend more time studying. The difference is what the brain is doing during that time.

SECTION 2

The Five Core Strategies

These are the study techniques most consistently supported by research on learning and memory. You don't need to use all five at once. Start with one or two, build the habit, then layer in more.

1. Retrieval Practice

What it is: Actively pulling information from memory instead of passively reviewing it. This is the single most effective study technique that exists.

Close your notes and write down everything you remember from the chapter

Use flashcards — but only if you're genuinely trying to recall before flipping

Answer practice questions without referring to the text first

At the end of every study session, quiz yourself on what you just covered

Why It Works

Every time your brain successfully retrieves a piece of information, it strengthens the neural pathway to that memory. The effort of recalling — even when it's hard — is what makes the learning durable.

2. Spaced Practice

What it is: Spreading study sessions over multiple days instead of concentrating everything into one sitting.

Study a topic, then come back to it 2–3 days later before you've fully forgotten it

Build a weekly review cycle: brief check-ins on older material alongside new learning

For exams, start reviewing at least 5–7 days out, not the night before

The Spacing Effect

Your brain consolidates memories during the gaps between study sessions. Cramming skips this process entirely — which is why you can pass a test on Friday and forget everything by Monday.

3. Interleaving

What it is: Mixing different topics or problem types within a single study session instead of focusing on one thing at a time.

Instead of 30 minutes on Topic A, then 30 on Topic B — alternate between them

In math, mix problem types rather than drilling 20 of the same kind

It will feel harder — and that's exactly why it works

Interleaving forces your brain to discriminate between concepts, which builds deeper understanding. Blocked practice (doing 20 of the same type) makes the method obvious, so you're not actually thinking — just executing.

4. Elaboration

What it is: Explaining what you're learning in your own words and connecting it to things you already know.

After reading a section, ask: "How would I explain this to someone who knows nothing about it?"

Ask yourself "why" and "how" questions about the material, not just "what"

Create analogies: "This is like ___ because ___"

Connect new concepts to prior knowledge: "How does this relate to what we learned last week?"

Elaboration works because learning is about building connections. The more connections a piece of information has, the easier it is to retrieve later.

5. Dual Coding

What it is: Combining verbal information (words) with visual information (diagrams, charts, timelines) to create two mental pathways to the same knowledge.

Sketch a diagram or flowchart of the process you're learning

Create a timeline for historical events instead of just listing dates

Use concept maps to show relationships between ideas

Draw it, then describe it. Describe it, then draw it.

A Note on "Learning Styles"

The idea that people are "visual learners" or "auditory learners" has been largely debunked by research. What actually works is using multiple modalities together — everyone benefits from combining words and visuals.

SECTION 3

Building a Study Session That Works

Knowing the strategies is one thing. Putting them together into a real study session is another. Here's a structure that works for most students.

The 45-Minute Study Block

You don't need marathon sessions. Forty-five focused minutes beats three distracted hours.

Phase	What You Do
First 5 min: Warm-up recall	Close your notes. Write everything you remember from last session on this topic.
Next 25 min: Active study	Work through new material using retrieval, elaboration, or dual coding. Take brief notes to test yourself on later.
Next 10 min: Self-test	Close everything again. Write, recite, or sketch what you just learned. Check against your notes. Mark what you missed.
Last 5 min: Plan	Write down 2–3 things to review next session. Schedule that session now.

How Many Sessions Per Subject?

A good rule of thumb for exam prep:

Start 5–7 days before the test

Study the subject for 30–45 minutes per day (not 3 hours the night before)

Alternate with other subjects to take advantage of interleaving

Use the final session before the test for retrieval practice only — no new material

SECTION 4

Note-Taking That Supports Learning

Notes aren't just a record of what happened in class. Done well, they're the foundation for everything that comes after — your study material, your retrieval cues, your elaboration prompts.

What Effective Notes Do

- Capture key ideas in your own words, not the teacher's exact phrasing
- Flag questions, confusions, and connections as they come up
- Create built-in study prompts (questions in the margin you can quiz yourself on later)
- Leave space to add information after class when you review

The Cornell Method (Adapted)

Divide your page into three sections:

Section	Purpose
Right column (2/3 of page)	Class notes — key ideas, examples, diagrams
Left column (1/3 of page)	Cue column — questions and keywords you write after class
Bottom strip	Summary — 2–3 sentence summary of the page's main ideas

The magic is in the cue column. After class, go back and write questions that your notes answer. Those questions become your retrieval practice material. Cover the right side, read the questions on the left, and try to answer from memory.

Handwriting vs. Typing

Research consistently shows that handwriting notes leads to better retention than typing. Typing encourages verbatim transcription; handwriting forces you to process and compress information in real time — which is a form of elaboration. If you must type, force yourself to paraphrase. Never transcribe word-for-word. After class, print your notes and add annotations by hand.

SECTION 5

Environment, Focus & the Phone Problem

The best study strategy in the world won't work if you can't sustain focus long enough to use it. Environment matters more than most students think.

Set Up Your Space

1. Designate a study space. Your brain builds associations between places and activities. Study in the same place consistently.
2. Clear your desk. Only the materials for this session should be visible.
3. Put your phone in another room. Not face-down. Not on silent. In another room.
4. Use a timer. Knowing there's an endpoint makes it easier to focus.

On the Phone

A study from the University of Texas found that the mere presence of a smartphone — even when turned off — reduces available cognitive capacity. You don't have to be looking at it for it to hurt your focus. The only solution that works is physical distance.

Music and Background Noise

Silence is best for most people during demanding cognitive work. If you need background sound, instrumental music or ambient noise is fine. Music with lyrics competes with the same cognitive channels you need for reading and writing.

If you "can't study without music," that's worth examining. It might mean the music is a crutch that's reducing discomfort but also reducing depth.

SECTION 6

Studying for Tests Specifically

Everything in this guide applies to test prep, but exams have some specific dynamics worth addressing directly.

The Review Plan

1. Start by listing every topic the test covers. Don't rely on memory — check the syllabus, past assignments, and any review materials provided.
2. Rate your confidence on each topic: strong, medium, or weak.
3. Spend most of your time on the mediums. Weak topics need foundational review first; strong topics just need a quick retrieval check.
4. Build a day-by-day plan working backward from the test date.

Practice Tests

If practice tests are available, use them — but use them right.

Take the practice test under real conditions: timed, closed-book, no phone

After you finish, don't just check answers. For every question you missed, write down why you missed it and what the correct reasoning is

Wait 2–3 days, then retake the same test. You should be able to explain every answer

The Night Before

Your last study session before a test should be light retrieval only. No new material. No cramming. Review your self-test questions, confirm you can recall key concepts, then stop. Sleep matters more than one more hour of review.

SECTION 7

Building Long-Term Study Habits

Strategies only work if you actually use them consistently. Here's how to make these techniques stick.

Start Small

Don't overhaul everything at once. Pick one strategy from this guide and use it for two weeks before adding another. Retrieval practice is the best place to start — it's the highest-impact change you can make.

Schedule It

Study sessions that aren't scheduled don't happen. Put them on your calendar with the same seriousness as practice or a doctor's appointment. Decide in advance: what subject, what time, how long, and what you'll do.

Track What Works

Keep a brief log: what you studied, which strategy you used, and how it went. After a few weeks, patterns emerge. You'll see which approaches feel productive, which subjects need more time, and where you're improving.

Expect It to Feel Hard

Effective studying doesn't feel easy. Retrieval practice is effortful. Spacing means you're studying material you've partially forgotten, which is uncomfortable. Interleaving feels slower than blocked practice. This is all by design. The difficulty is the mechanism.

If studying feels smooth and effortless, you're probably using a passive strategy. A little bit of struggle is a sign that real learning is happening.

QUICK REFERENCE

Strategy Summary

Strategy	In One Sentence
Retrieval Practice	Test yourself from memory instead of rereading.
Spaced Practice	Spread study over days, not one sitting.
Interleaving	Mix topics and problem types in one session.
Elaboration	Explain it in your own words and connect it to what you know.
Dual Coding	Combine words with visuals for two pathways to the same idea.

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