

# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## Helping First-Year Students Study

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(PART II)

Few freshmen can keep pace with their courses if they study only an hour between classes and if their only study activities are reading, highlighting, and copying over notes. Faculty expect more, and those who teach freshmen play an important role both in making expectations about college work explicit and in helping freshmen develop their study skills. What, then, might we do to get students to spend more time studying and to study in more productive ways?

**Set the stage for new study practices by stressing that learning in college involves more than memorizing.** One reason students spend so much time underlining, taking verbatim notes, and then copying them over is that they try to memorize information, often exactly as it was presented. For a variety of reasons--some experiential, others developmental--freshmen tend to equate learning with memorizing. If we aim for more, if understanding and thinking are important goals, we must explain in understandable terms what those goals entail.

Showing students the types of questions they can expect on exams or papers is a good way to start. Point out that they will need to know some things in order to address these questions, but answering them requires more. They must be able to apply their knowledge to examples, problems, issues or situations that were not discussed in class or in their texts. This ability to use knowledge in new situations requires study activities different from memorizing.

**Talk about good study practices early in the course and in the syllabus.** What techniques and strategies might help students learn more from the readings and from class? Many freshmen need to see demonstrations and to practice these activities before they can use them, but describing them in the syllabus signals their importance and reminds students what their responsibilities for learning include. Also discuss more general questions about work outside class. How much time should students expect to spend studying between classes? How do class meetings, readings and other assignments connect? Should students read assignments before they are discussed in class or afterwards?

**Teach students how to take notes in your class.** Even students who are good note-takers or who have participated in study skills workshops benefit from help in adapting those skills to particular classes. What cues do you provide in lectures for helping students identify key ideas? Should they record examples in their notes? How much detail should they try to get down? What about taking notes during discussions or other class activities? Suggest, too, that students should do more than simply read over or copy over their notes between classes. Recommend instead that students go back over their notes, identify the key ideas and write them in the margins. Then tell them to cover up their notes and try to explain the ideas in their own words "as if they were talking to a friend." Paraphrasing may go slowly at first, but it is an important step toward understanding and remembering ideas.

Early in the course, take some time to model good note-taking and to provide guided practice. Ten or fifteen minutes into a lecture, stop and show students the notes you would have taken. Ask them to identify differences between their notes and yours. What did they miss and why? Are they trying to write down too much detail? What should they try to do differently? Repeat the exercise once or twice more during class. Follow up in the next class by showing them how you identified the key ideas or issues in your notes and how you would paraphrase an explanation.

**Plan similar instruction on strategies to learn from reading.** Keeping up with the reading is a source of anxiety for most freshmen. In each of the last several years, about 40% of incoming

freshmen has identified "to improve reading and study skills" as a very important reason in deciding to go to college (Fact File, 1994). Once enrolled, many more discover they must improve their reading comprehension skills in order to succeed. Fortunately, research shows that students benefit from instruction in how to learn from reading, especially when the instruction shows them how to adapt general skills to particular texts (McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin & Smith, 1986).

Begin by stating explicitly what students should try to get from the reading so that they know what expectations you have in mind. Suggest that they skim the assignment to identify main ideas before they read. Help them see how the book is organized and what cues the authors provide to signify main ideas. Then encourage them to read with pen in hand, marking the main ideas or writing them in the margins. Most importantly, urge them to stop every ten minutes, to look back at the key ideas and to try to summarize what they've read. Stress that pausing to review is at least as important as reading itself. The periodic review helps one maintain concentration, process information more deeply, and remember it longer.

To illustrate, show students your text. Talk about what you marked and why, what cues you used to know these were important points. Then model how you review and summarize while you read, what you say to yourself during those pauses to review. Ask students in pairs to try the same thing with the next two sections, each taking a turn at identifying the main ideas and summarizing.

Active reading takes practice. Acknowledge that students may feel awkward at first, but the more they read actively, the more skilled they will become. As they develop their skills, both their reading speed and comprehension will improve. Point out too that when they pause to review, they may find they cannot summarize the main ideas--a sure sign that they have not understood the section. They need to reread and then try again to summarize the main points. If they still cannot explain the ideas after two or three tries, tell them to formulate a question about the section, write it down, and bring it to class. Requiring that they submit questions on sections they do not understand discourages students from giving up too soon.

**Develop assignments that actively engage students in study activities.** Few freshmen will take time to write summaries or look for additional examples or work problems unless an assignment prompts them to do so. If we want students to adopt new study practices, initially we will need assignments that require them to engage in those practices. To develop such assignments, it helps to think about the mental activities that characterize deeper processing of information. To involve students in *organizing and connecting ideas*, for example, ask them to make outlines or draw concept maps. Prod them *to make material meaningful* by requiring that they paraphrase, summarize, or teach the material to someone else. *To extend meaning and broaden connections*, ask them to find additional examples in newspapers or media, to compare and contrast new ideas with those discussed earlier, or to rethink a position taken earlier in light of new material. Encourage them to *consider ideas in a variety of contexts and situations* by assigning case studies or problems drawn from different settings.

**Help students to form study groups.** Research indicates that students working in groups learn more and remember it longer (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Light, 1992). We ought not leave the formation of study groups to chance in any of our courses, but freshmen especially need help in forming study groups and getting started. During the first or second week, help students form their groups and set a meeting time and place. Describe the purposes of the study groups, the nature of the work to be done there, and the responsibilities of each member. Initially, at least, give specific assignments to provide structure and guidance. Check periodically to see how the groups are working by reviewing assignments completed in the study groups, for example, or by asking members to take turns writing and submitting minutes of their meetings. From time to time, invite students to evaluate the effectiveness of their study groups and the contributions of each member. Davis (1993) includes additional ideas for creating and facilitating study teams and suggests ways to avoid potential problems.

**Encourage students to reflect on various study techniques and to adopt those best suited to their learning styles.** Research on learning styles indicates that people differ in the ways they carry out

basic information processing activities. We know, for example that only meaningful information is transferred from working memory to long term memory and that paraphrasing is a powerful strategy for making material meaningful, but paraphrasing can take different forms. Students who learn best by *thinking things through in solitary study* will likely prefer assignments that ask them to write a paraphrase or to think about different ways to explain the ideas. Students who learn by *talking things through with others* will benefit more from paraphrasing assignments in which they actually explain the material to someone else.

Getting freshmen to reflect on the suitability of various study activities does not require administering a battery of learning style inventories, although students usually find such inventories interesting and helpful. Two things are required, however, if we are to help freshmen identify the most effective study strategies for them. First, we must expose students to a variety of study techniques, not just those that served us well. Second, we must encourage students to reflect on the usefulness of various study strategies for them. After modelling different forms of paraphrasing, for example, ask students to try them out and let you know their reactions. Did they find it easier to paraphrase by talking or in writing? Which do they think helped them more? Which technique will they be most likely to use on a regular basis? After the first quiz or exam is also a good time to get students to reflect on their study activities. Ask them to indicate how satisfied they are with their performance, to identify which study techniques they think helped them most, and to describe what they intend to do differently before the next exam.

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