

Using Psychology to Study Psychology

STUDY TIP #1 Now Is The Time

Welcome to psychology! I hope that you find this course (and this textbook and study guide) to be all that you expect it to be. In this section of the Study Guide, I will share some thoughts on how to maximize your performance in this course. The suggestions and advice that I will make come directly from psychology itself and have been tested over generations of college students.

You are about to begin a new course, and a new semester. It's all rather exciting, really. In many ways, the beginning of a new semester is nearly magical—filled with promise, high hopes, and good intentions. There are new people to meet, new experiences to be relished, new things to be learned.

What I would like you to start thinking about right now is that right now is the very best time to get started with your studying. The points you earn on your first classroom test are just as valuable as the points you will earn on your final exam. Every semester during Finals Week, several of my students wish that they had done better on their classroom quizzes earlier in the semester because now they find that they must do a truly superior job on the final exam. That's putting unnecessary pressure on one's self at finals' time.

There is recent research that demonstrates that procrastinators—people who tend to put things off until “later”—are healthy and happy people at the beginning of a semester. Toward the end of the semester, however, because they have neglected so much work, they are unhappy, stressed, and suffer an abnormally high incidence of physical ailments and illnesses.

So get to it—not this weekend, or tomorrow, or the day after, but right now, today. As the semester goes by, you will be glad you got off to a good start. I wish you well. If at any time during this course you have any questions at all, please feel free to contact me at **TheCyProf@aol.com**.

Josh R. Gerow

STUDY TIP #2

“How Much Should I Study?”

One of the main reasons that some students do not do as well in their college courses as they would like is that they simply do not have—or do not make—enough time for studying. If you were to ask your textbook authors or your instructor how much time you should spend studying psychology, we are likely to say something like, “You should be studying every waking minute of every day.” As it happens, of course, we know better. We know that you have other classes that require your time, and we realize that you have a multitude of commitments pulling at you for your attention. Nonetheless, if you are going to succeed at this business of being a college student, it is important to understand that being successful is going to be time-consuming. Almost certainly, the amount of time you spent studying in high school will be inadequate now that you are in college.

My students chuckle—or laugh out loud—when I tell them that the standard rule of thumb regarding study time is to schedule three hours outside of class for every hour spent in class. Note what that means: If yours is a 3-credit hour psychology class (most are), you should set aside **9 hours a week** to study psychology! That’s right: 9 hours studying psychology in addition to the time you spend in class.

This rule of thumb is valid at the beginning of the semester. A few weeks’ experience may suggest that more or less time will be needed depending on the difficulty of the classes you are taking. Some classes may require even more time, while a few may take less. The implications here are significant. If you are taking a full-time load, or nearly so, let’s say 15-18 credit hours, I’m suggesting that as an average student, you will need 45 to 54 hours each week for study time. Yes. That’s like a full-time job, and thinking about your college experience as a full-time job is a reasonable thing to do. Again: You will be in class or studying from 60 to 72 hours each week. Additionally, you will need time for sleeping, relationships, eating, dressing, driving, a part-time job, perhaps, and—I would hope—some fun! And there are only 168 hours in each week. Time management is clearly an important issue for college students.

STUDY TIP #3

“When Should I Study?”

I have already made the point that doing well in college is going to require a lot of study time. I also have acknowledged that there are other things for you to do each week in addition to studying. How do you best schedule study time? Fortunately, many decades of research on this issue provides some guidance.

As you will see when we discuss memory, “distributed practice is superior to massed practice.” What that means is that cramming doesn’t work. It means that there is an optimal balance between study and rest, study and rest. It means that you should not even think about sitting down to study anything for three hours on a Sunday afternoon, or for four hours on a Wednesday evening. That’s too much time “massed” together to be truly effective.

For most college students and most course work, a concentrated, focused study effort of about 45 minutes duration is best. Then there should be a rest, a “break,” of 15-20 minutes before resuming one’s study. In fact, what the data show us is that just 10-15 minute episodes of good, solid study can be very useful. Another—nearly obvious—point about scheduling study time is that (usually) daylight study is superior to studying in the evenings or night time when you are more likely to be tired and unable to focus attention. Now put those two ideas together. An excellent time to study is during short periods of opportunity throughout the day. If a class gets out a little early, what a great chance to review some notes or go over some vocabulary, or start to think about what will happen in your next class.

Perhaps you got by in high school with studying on the weekends and an occasional evening or two. Unless you’re awfully lucky or awfully bright, that’s not likely to be the case in college.

STUDY TIP #4

“Where Should I Study?”

There's a good chance that this topic may strike you as too silly to bother with. Bear with me. It's not as silly as it sounds—and there is good psychology to back me up.

A lot of research tells us that the best place to study is the very location where you will be tested. Scuba divers learn some material at poolside. They learn different material while sitting on the bottom of the pool in their scuba gear. Some time later, they are tested on what they can remember. Material learned at poolside is remembered significantly better there than when it is tested under water. Materials learned under water are recalled better there than at poolside. So then, where is the best place to study for a psychology exam? In the classroom in which the exam is to be given.

It is not likely that you will be able to spend a lot of time studying in your psychology classroom (but every minute or two would help). So then where do you go? A designated place. There should be someplace at home, on campus, in the public library, that you can set aside, designate as the main place where you will do your studying. Do nothing else there but study. Make it your special “study place.” The problem with trying to study at the kitchen table is that the kitchen table is associated with other non-study activities like eating.

If you are living at home, getting your own designated study area may cause a bit of family friction. You are going to need some cooperation in this regard. You can't be expected to study successfully if you are sitting in the living room, watching TV, and looking after a younger brother or sister at the same time.

STUDY TIP #5

“What Should I Study?”

You know my first reaction to this question, don't you? Everything! And that's not just my initial reaction. It's to be expected from all of your professors. We really do like what we're teaching. We really do think that this is just the most wonderful stuff in the world, and we want everybody to know everything.

We often hear academics talking about “empowering students to think critically” about this or that. And such is a fine goal. Indeed, we would like all of our students to be able to think critically about psychological issues, make their own judgments about psychological claims, and see how psychological concepts are personally relevant. It seems to me, however, that we should back off a little. Let's make sure that we know what we are talking about. Let's get the facts straight before we get involved in deep, abstract, philosophical discussions about psychology.

It was Ivan Pavlov we associate with classical conditioning, not B. F. Skinner. There are similarities and there are differences between classical conditioning and operant conditioning. Once you are comfortable with these ideas we can move on to discussing how Pavlovian conditioning or Skinnerian conditioning can be used in advertising or politics. But such a discussion will be rather pointless if the basic concepts are not well understood.

My point? First things first. It is advantageous to learn the terminology, the vocabulary, first. To help with that task, we have placed most important terms and their definitions in the textbook's margins. Then look for the major ideas or main points of each section. It is somewhat simplistic, but we have tried to reflect these main points in the “Before You Go On” questions throughout each chapter. The logic is clear: Before you go on, pause and consider what you have just read. Does it make sense? Can you answer the question we have asked there? If you can, fine, forge ahead. If you cannot, then don't just keep going on. Stop. Reflect. Reread and think about the section you have just finished.

STUDY TIP #6

“How Should I Study?”

The whole idea of studying—indeed, the whole idea of going to college in the first place—is to learn and remember something that you did not know or remember before. Studying is the active process of placing information into one’s memory in such a way that it can be located and retrieved later. The information that one places into memory during study is not just restricted to simple facts, but also includes knowledge of new ways of discovering information, thinking about information in new ways and evaluating information. In simple terms, it is a process in which stuff “out there” gets placed into memory in a usable way.

The first thing to realize is that studying is **an active process**. It is one in which you have to become actively involved. Sorry, but no matter how long you sit there with a book on your lap, nothing is going to happen until you start getting involved with what you are reading. Sorry, but if you are sitting in class daydreaming about last weekend’s date, nothing is going to get learned, no matter how brilliant the lecture.

The essence of study is found in what psychologists call “elaborative rehearsal.” To study effectively is to take to-be-learned material and elaborate on it. Think about it. Make it meaningful. Relate it to something you already know, to something you have learned elsewhere. For example, we use several stories and examples in the text in an effort to make the material meaningful. But these are our stories; they are our examples. It is much more useful to generate your own.

One of the things that makes psychology an easier course of study than some others is that it is (usually) fairly easy to relate what you are studying to some personal experience. When the text talks about various schedules of reinforcement, think about how each would affect your performance. When your instructor lectures about Piaget’s theory of development stages in children, think about a younger brother, sister, niece or nephew, or perhaps, your own child or children. The more you can relate what you are learning to what you already know, the better will be your learning, and the better will be your retention.

STUDY TIP #7

Tend To Your Own Stress Levels

Let's take a break from tips about studying *per se* to talk about something very common among college students: **stress**. Stress is a reaction to stressors. It is an unpleasant, arousing, and disruptive reaction to frustrations, conflicts, and life events. To be alive in the world and paying attention is to experience stress. We may try to structure our lives in ways to reduce our experienced stress, but, in general, stress is unavoidable. Relevant to our current discussions, stress interferes with one's study. To study efficiently requires focused attention, concentration, and all the mental energy you can muster. If you are distracted and distressed by stress, anxiety, anger, and confusion, quality study time will be one of the first victims.

The very best way to deal with stress in your life is to deal with (if not eliminate) the stressor that caused it. In the meantime, however, there are several steps that you can take that will help you feel better and work more effectively. It is important, for example, to get enough rest. Being sleep-deprived is in itself stressful. It is important to do whatever you can to stay physically healthy. Engaging in physical exercise can be helpful. Learning techniques of relaxation can be very effective.

And here's a point that is particularly important for college students who are experiencing stress: Social support has enormous advantages. Do not suffer stress alone. If you do not have an adequate circle of friends on campus with whom to share your troubles, seek help elsewhere. Check with your campus counseling center or the office of student services. See your psychology instructor. He or she may not be in a position to help, but I'll bet that your instructor knows of places you can go to get help dealing with excessive levels of stress in your life. If you are too "stressed out" to use them, none of these "Study Tips" will be of much use.

STUDY TIP #8

A Word About Motivation and Goals

Effective study habits are developed, not for their own sake, but to make learning more efficient. You don't go to college to study; rather, you go to learn. A good college student is one who knows how to maximize opportunities to learn. A successful college student is also one who is motivated to learn.

We can learn some things "by accident," without really intending to do so. We may not set out to learn the numbers on the uniforms of the players on our favorite team, but after watching several games, we discover that we can identify the players without a scorecard. Our most efficient learning, however, occurs when we intend to learn, when we make a conscious effort to acquire new information.

Anyone who has a firm goal in mind, who knows what he or she is striving for, and why, can be said to be well motivated. Difficulties in learning in college can arise when students have no clear-cut goals, do not really know why they are there, and are not motivated to do well. "Doing well in college" is a very general goal. To be most effective, goals and motives should be as concrete and specific as possible. "Doing well" must therefore be broken down into manageable pieces. First think about this year, then this term. Take each course in turn. What grade do you hope to earn? Then break down each course, perhaps in terms of assignments or exams. What is your goal for your next exam? To prepare for that exam how many pages of text will you study over the weekend? How many practice problems will you try? Make sure your goals are realistic. It might be noble to strive for an A+ on every quiz, exam, and assignment, but is such a goal realistic? You might have to be ready to accept some compromises. Any student (or any other type of organism) that consistently falls short of goals (even self-established goals) eventually will become frustrated, lose interest, and suffer reduced motivation.

Your goals should not be too stringent, nor should they be too long-range. It's fine to dream of becoming a doctor, but you might be better off concentrating on next week's midterm exam. Short-term goals are usually more effective motivators than are long-term goals.

STUDY TIP #9

The Key To Effective Listening In Class

“But I never missed a class!” is a claim that instructors often hear from students who have not done well on an exam, and who have not yet learned the difference between attending a class and taking an active part in that class. This difference has a significant impact on how well students learn. The real key is preparation.

It is always easier to listen to and understand information with which you are familiar than it is to try to listen to and understand totally unfamiliar information. To be sure, few lectures or class activities are designed to be about something you knew very well before you took the class. The material will have to be somewhat new; that’s what you’re paying for. But if you prepare carefully, lectures and class discussions will not seem totally alien. Once a semester is under way, preparing for class will be relatively easy. You will have had time to develop some sense of what will be happening in class.

At the very least you should review recent lecture notes and preview the text for each class meeting. Perhaps the most important thing to do is to familiarize yourself with the vocabulary terms that might come up in class. If you’re familiar with the vocabulary **before** you go to class, your listening for ideas, unifying themes, and over-arching concepts will be easier because you won’t have to struggle with the definitions of new terms. You will then have more time to concentrate, select, organize, and summarize your thoughts in coherent notes.

Good listening is a matter of attitude. To be an effective listener, you must be in the proper frame of mind. As you take your seat, you have to rid your mind of thoughts of the activities of the day. You cannot do a good job of listening to a lecture if you’re thinking about last night’s date or this afternoon’s lunch. You’ll have difficulty attending to what is going on in class if you’re still focused on a disagreement with a loved one. You can’t contribute to a class discussion if all you are prepared to talk about is last weekend’s game. Get your mind warmed up: What’s the professor going to be talking about today? What contributions will you be expected to make? How will today’s class fit in with what you already know? When you find yourself totally surprised at what is being said in class you have not prepared adequately.

STUDY TIP #10

On Taking Useful Notes In Class

Attending class and listening carefully are important because lectures are presented to you only once. This is also why you'll need some written record of the information presented orally in class. Good lecture notes, written in your own style, are valuable tools for learning. There is a large body of research devoted to note taking. Here, I'll just touch on two principles that will help you learn psychology—or any other discipline.

1. ***Select and organize what you hear.*** It is probably already apparent to you that there is no way that you can write down everything that is said in class. This can be an advantage. Note taking should be an active process of selecting and organizing information. Although it is generally better to take too many notes than it is to take too few, it is important to be an active listener who participates in class, not a passive, mechanical writer. The notes you take will be yours, so put them in a form that you can use. Except for technical terms and new vocabulary, use your own words. Copying information is not learning it. Develop shortcuts. Feel free to abbreviate, but only if you will be able to understand your symbols and notes when you go back to study them. From time to time, taking no notes at all may be best. Thinking about what is being said, or participating in a class discussion may be more meaningful.
2. ***Edit and review your notes.*** Classroom notes are always a “work in progress.” Immediately after class, while material is still fresh, review your notes, fill in gaps, underline for emphasis, note unclear sections that need further work, and use your margins to jot down information you did not have time to record during class. Several times a week, as part of your study, continue the editing process. Use your textbook or other notes, outside readings, or consult with your instructor for correct spellings, missing details, clarification, and the like. After each quiz or exam in the course, go back and critically evaluate your own notes. To what extent did they help? How can they be improved? Did you write too much? Too little? Was the format you used the best possible for you?

STUDY TIP #11

The Essentials of Textbook Study

No matter what the course, there will be more information stored in your textbook than could ever be presented in class. Therefore, learning how to get information from your text is one of the most important skills you can acquire while in college. Here are a few general ideas.

1. ***Prepare for textbook study.*** Develop expectations about all that you read. Read the chapter preview; skim the summary; glance at the headings, subtitles and illustrations. Even before you begin reading, you should have a series of questions in mind. “What is this all about?” “How can I make sense of this?” “How will this show up on an exam?”
2. ***Read textbooks differently.*** Reading a chapter in a textbook is not studying. Studying is a process in which you must get actively and personally involved. It requires a great deal more concentration than does reading for pleasure. It involves you asking and seeking answers to questions. There are times when you should actually stop reading! Stop, pause, and think about what you’ve just read. Does it make sense? If not, do not go on making matters worse.
3. ***Make textbook study an active process.*** You must be mentally active and alert while studying so that you can search, question, and think. Underlining or highlighting in textbooks has become a common practice. It is often misused. The purpose of highlighting is to emphasize passages in the text so that essential points can be reviewed economically. When 80 percent of a page is underlined for emphasis, however, it is the remaining 20 percent that usually appears more striking.
4. ***Use the textbook’s margins.*** You can increase the value of your textbook as a study aid by using its margins for your personal notations. Make your text a storehouse of references. Cross-reference textbook material with information in your notes. If it’s your book, use it—don’t be afraid to write in it.

STUDY TIP #12

Preparing For Exams I: The Difference Between Learning and Performance

Learning is a process that takes place inside an individual. We cannot see learning take place. We cannot plot its course. What we must do is infer that learning has taken place by measuring an individual's performance. Simply put, learning involves acquiring new information; performance involves retrieving that information when it is needed. And, justifiably or not, it is your performance that tends to be evaluated. Your performance, not your learning, earns your grades in the classroom and your raise or promotion in the workplace.

So how will this great insight help your study? If you accept my premise, it means that you need to spend time and effort learning new information—here new information about psychology. But then you also ought to spend some time practicing what is really going to be graded: your retrieval of that information. And how do you do that? In the simplest terms, you test yourself. You test yourself (practice retrieval) before your instructor comes along and tests you for real.

There are a couple of things you might consider. Once you have finished reading a section of the textbook, feel that you understand it quite well, and can adequately answer the “Before You Go On” questions there, think about how the information in that section might show up on your next classroom exam. If you had to generate three multiple-choice questions over that material, what might they be? Yes, you may “know” the information now, but will you recognize it when it appears on a test? The other thing that you can do, of course, is to work through the “Practice Tests” that we have provided for each of the Topics in the text. These questions are not likely to show up on your classroom exams, but at least they give you an idea of what sorts of questions we psychology professors can dream up. A note: Please don't rely on Practice Tests as a primary means of studying. They don't help much in the process of elaborating on new information and forming new memories. They are designed to help in improving your performance, not your original learning.

STUDY TIP #13

Preparing For Exams II: Some Thoughts On Multiple-Choice Exams

Multiple-choice exams are the most common for students in their first psychology course. I know that you have taken hundreds of multiple-choice tests over your academic career. I also know that general “rules” have many exceptions. Nonetheless, there are some hints about taking multiple-choice exams that we can review quickly.

1. ***There is no substitute for being prepared.*** No matter how clever or lucky you are, the best way to prepare for an exam of any type is to study for it.
2. ***Relax—be cool.*** You're prepared for this exam. This is no time to panic. Take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and relax.
3. ***Read the directions and give the test a quick once-over.*** Yes, you probably know what to do, but take a minute to make sure that you're following the directions. Scan the whole test. Estimate time needs.
4. ***Skip items of which you are unsure.*** If you encounter an item for which the answer is not immediately obvious, that's okay. Skip it. Don't agonize over it. Skip it. Just don't forget to come back to it later.
5. ***Be sure you know what the item is asking about.*** You know that you know the material. If it's not immediately clear, you've got to find a match between what you know and what this item is asking about.
6. ***Eliminate distracter alternatives.*** If you don't see the best answer right away, at least mark out those that are clearly wrong, that don't fit grammatically, or that say the same thing as some other alternative.
7. ***See if the answer to one item can be found somewhere in another item.*** Imagine one question that asks: “In Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea . . .” followed later by a question that asks, “who wrote The Old Man and the Sea?” Believe me, it happens.
8. ***Look out for double negatives.*** If something is said to be “not false,” then it's true. If someone is “not unintelligent,” then he or she is smart.
9. ***Avoid absolute statements (most of the time).*** Particularly in psychology, very little is always or never, but may be often or seldom.
10. ***Do not be afraid to change your answer.*** No matter what you may have been told, there is no evidence that students are likely to change from correct answers to incorrect ones. Change your answers if you'd like.

STUDY TIP #14

Dealing With Family And Friends

Let's again step back from all this academic/study discussion for a minute and consider an issue of more personal concern that may very well impact on your study habits.

Make no mistake: Going to college is going to change you and your life. You are going to learn a great deal of information about many subjects. You also are going to meet a variety of new and different people, and you'll make new friends. You will grow—personally, socially, and professionally. As new friendships and relationships blossom, stresses and strains can be put on old ones.

Making new friends is easier for some people than it is for others. If you are one of those for whom the process is difficult, please realize that you're not alone. Also realize that you can learn to be more comfortable in social situations; like anything else, it takes practice. Respect, civility and the common decency of what used to be called "good manners" go a long way toward developing a relationship with others.

Here are a few pointers to consider when interacting with others.

1. Try to be as pleasant and cordial as possible.
2. Give others an opportunity to express themselves.
3. Try taking the position, "I would really like to understand why you did or said or think or feel as you do."
4. Listen carefully and see if you can summarize what you've heard.
5. Consider interactions to be two-way; you need to be ready to share how you feel about things.
6. Try to recognize and understand differences, not asking everyone else to change to minimize those differences.
7. Be prepared to agree to disagree if necessary.
8. Be honest with your comments and compliments.
9. Try to avoid being critical and blaming.
10. If working with others on a project, be sure to do your share.
11. Act toward others, as you would like them to act toward you.
12. Don't be afraid to apologize if you recognize that you did something wrong or said something unkind.
13. Smile whenever you can and whenever it's appropriate.

STUDY TIP #15

“What About The SQ3R Method?”

Over 50 years ago, a teacher named Francis Robinson described a strategy for studying that he called the *SQ3R Method*. It is recommended for two reasons: 1) it is simple, and 2) it works. You only need to know what the letters stand for.

S = Survey. The idea is to anticipate what you are about to study by looking ahead, reading the chapter outline and glancing through the chapter. What lies ahead?

Q = Question. Continually and actively ask yourself about what you are reading. If nothing else, from time to time just stop and ask yourself what I call the universal study question: “Whaaa?—in the sense of “What did I just read about?” (Again, we have our “Before You Go On” Questions in the text to help you out on this one.)

R1 = Read. Once you’ve surveyed and questioned, the time has come to get to it and read the text. Remember to space or distribute your practice (your reading).

R2 = Recite. In this instance, we don't really mean to perform “out loud.” The basic idea is to “talk to yourself” about what you’re reading. Keep your questions in mind and “recite” the answers to them as they are encountered.

R3 = Review. Sounds like we’ve been through this before, doesn’t it? By review, Robinson meant what I meant when I cautioned you to schedule time to go back over your classroom notes, plan to read your text more than once, and reevaluate your study strategy after every quiz or exam.