

Making Good Grades

“*I am still learning.*”

—Michelangelo

You may feel pressure from your parents or instructors to make good grades, but to achieve real success, you have to want to do well yourself. The drive and goals and desire have to come from you. Although your instructors, parents, siblings, and friends can encourage you, the responsibility is yours to decide to do your best. You must be willing to dedicate the time and effort needed to succeed in school. No one can do that for you.

Doing your best without any guidance is difficult. That’s the purpose of this book: to help you make effective use of your time, study better, prepare for class, know and meet the expectations of your instructor, and more.

This chapter discusses some basic factors or attitudes you need to master, including how to plan your schedule, prepare for class, know the course requirements, and do the required work.

Planning Your Schedule

In some schools, you get to choose the classes you take. If you don’t get to choose, you can skip this section, but do pay attention to Chapter 2, which covers how to manage your time (homework time, sports activities, and so on). If you do get to select your classes, read this section for advice on how to choose classes

suiting for both your educational requirements as well as your interests. If you pick classes of special interest to you, you are more likely to *want* to do the work, and your grades may reflect your interest.

WHAT CLASSES DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE?

You need to determine which classes are required for you to pass to the next grade (or to graduate, depending on where you are in your school career). Requirements are usually set by the state and local government, school district, or college. Required courses may vary from state to state and even school to school. For example, your school may require you to take a certain number of foreign language classes. Some private schools even require you to master a musical instrument, participate in drama or sports, and/or engage in volunteer work before you can graduate.

Your school should provide a list of courses that are required for your grade level. You can also check with your guidance counselor or advisor to help plan your courses.

WHAT CLASSES ARE AVAILABLE?

Next you need to determine which courses are offered at your school and at what times. The school may publish a course guide with a short description of the class and its meeting time and instructor. You can use this to get a good idea of the various classes offered.

Ask Classmates

Although you can get class information from your school Web site or course list, this information usually gives you only the bare minimum. Go, instead, to your best resource: students who have taken that course. These students can tell you how much work is involved, whether the instructor presents the information in an engaging way (or is a bore), and other factors that can help you select your classes.

Think Ahead

If you're in high school and planning to go to college, keep in mind that college admissions offices look closely at the courses you take. Therefore, don't take only easy electives. In addition, try to build your electives around a theme or set of skills instead of taking classes randomly.

If your school has a Web site, it may also list available classes along with a description, meeting time(s), and the instructor that teaches that class. You can use these resources to select courses of interest to you.

WHAT CLASSES DO YOU WANT TO TAKE?

After you list the classes you need to take, you can then decide how many elective courses you can take. *Elective courses* are courses that aren't required but that still count toward your diploma or degree requirements. For example, you may want to take a drawing class if you're interested in art. If you like drama and your school offers drama classes, you can sign up for one of these courses. You can use the list of available classes at your school to select your elective classes.

If you're an honor student, you may seek out elective classes that help you prepare for college. For example, perhaps your school requires only two science courses, but your main interest is in science. In this case, you may want to take additional science courses. The same goes for math courses or other tough classes that students usually don't think of as fun electives.

WHEN IS THE CLASS AND WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS?

Two factors to consider when choosing classes are the time the course is offered and the requirements of the class. Obviously, you can't schedule two classes at the same time on the same day, so you may need to make some alternative plans if desired classes clash.

Best Time of Day

While you won't always be able to schedule your classes around the hours you prefer, do take into consideration when you're at your best. If you're a morning person, you may prefer scheduling your hardest morning classes. If you have trouble waking up and don't feel alert until mid-morning, schedule your more difficult classes for later in the day, if possible.

Also, take into consideration the requirements of the class. What types of assessments are used? Tests? Papers? Projects? How much homework is typical for that class? You don't want to overload your class schedule; instead, you want to be able to devote the necessary time needed for each class. If you think your plans are too ambitious, consider reworking your schedule. You're better off doing well in all your classes (a mix of harder and easier ones) than taking only hard classes and having problems in one (or more) of them. On the flip side, don't load up on all easy classes, either. Too many easy classes won't prepare you for the challenges ahead. Strive for a balance.

Note, too, that some courses require labs in addition to the regular class time. For example, most science courses require you to do lab work *and* attend the lecture classes.

Another factor to consider is that some courses have *prerequisites*—that is, other courses you must take and pass before you can be admitted into a particular course. Course prerequisites should be listed in the course schedule.

Finally, keep in mind any extracurricular activities that you participate in. Chapter 2 goes into more detail about managing your time, but think about your hobbies and extracurriculars when selecting your classes and planning your course schedule.

Knowing What Your Instructor Expects

When your classes begin and you are introduced to your instructor, you should make sure you know what the expectations are for the class. The instructor should provide detailed guidelines about the expectations for the class. Usually, these are written and included as a handout, and they may also be posted on a school Web site. If you aren't provided with written guidelines, be sure to take notes and ask questions if there are assignments or rules you don't understand. Knowing what's expected of you helps you set goals for what you want to accomplish. Also, the expectations of the class (and how well you meet them) are what determine your grade in the class. To do well, you need to make sure you meet (and exceed) the requirements and expectations of that class.

In general, your instructor will usually provide you with the following information:

- ✓ **Assessments:** How are grades determined? By tests? Papers? A combination of factors? The grading criteria should be explicitly covered at the beginning of class so that you know exactly what you need to do to get a good grade in that class. Spelling out the grading methods also prevents the instructor from assigning grades arbitrarily.
- ✓ **Class policies:** Your instructor should spell out the attendance policy. If you miss class, does it affect your grade? How should you notify the instructor if you're going to miss a class? What about late assignments? Is a late assignment penalized? If so, in what way?
- ✓ **Contact methods:** Your instructor should tell you how he or she prefers to be contacted. For example, if you have an e-mail system at your school, can you e-mail your instructor if you're going to be absent? Can you get assignments you missed via e-mail?
- ✓ **Class participation:** Does the instructor expect you to be actively involved in discussion? Does the course use peer

Not Sure How Grades Are Determined?

Your instructor should outline at the very start of a class how grades are determined. In college and high school classes, you usually get a syllabus that outlines the course topics, assignments, deadlines, and other important information. In grade-school classes, the instructor may orally explain the grading procedure. If you aren't given this information or aren't sure how grades are determined, ask your instructor. You want to know beforehand rather than after the class has ended how your class performance will be assessed.

evaluation (for example, in reading and making suggestions on rough drafts of papers)? Does part of your grade consist of class participation? Are you penalized if you don't participate?

- ✓ **Questions:** Usually, you raise your hand and wait to be called on, but your instructor may have other preferences on how to participate or ask questions.

Instructors have difficult jobs, and they usually teach because they enjoy it. What makes them happy is to see you progress and succeed. No matter what your skill level, they want to see you trying your hardest. They want to make you feel excited about learning and show this excitement. Knowing what the instructor hopes to achieve overall can help you better understand the instructor's motives and expectations.

A GOOD STUDENT . . .

Instructors often spell out the qualities or expectations for a good student. If not, the following list gives you some idea of what the instructor ideally expects from you:

- ✓ Treat the instructor with respect and courtesy. Be polite.
- ✓ Be honest. Rather than lie about being late or not having an assignment, tell the truth (and accept the consequences). The instructor will respect you more if you tell the truth rather than make up some obvious lie.
- ✓ Come to class on time.
- ✓ Do the assignments for class and meet all deadlines for projects. Be prepared for tests.
- ✓ If you have to miss a class, let the instructor know ahead of time, if possible. Also, arrange to get the homework so that you aren't behind when you return.
- ✓ Wait to be called on if you have a question.
- ✓ Participate in class discussions and ask questions. Doing so shows the instructor that you're paying attention and are actively applying the information.
- ✓ Ask for extra help after or before class (or at some other prearranged time) if you're struggling with a concept or project. Doing so shows the instructor you're aware that you aren't doing as well as you want, that you need help, and that you're taking responsibility by asking for help.

A PROBLEM STUDENT . . .

Most good instructors focus on positive behaviors and don't outline the qualities of a problem student. Still, you can generally expect instructors to find the following classroom actions unacceptable:

- ✓ Talking when someone else is talking, whether that's the instructor or another classmate.
- ✓ Blurting out a question or answer without being called on.

- ✓ Coming late to class.
- ✓ Being unprepared for class.
- ✓ Making up excuses or lying about being late or not having work done.
- ✓ Distracting other classmates from their work.
- ✓ Bullying, demeaning, threatening, or harassing another student or the instructor.
- ✓ Bringing distractions (magazines, CD or MP3 players, toys, and so on) to class. This may also include food, drinks, and even chewing gum.
- ✓ Cheating on a paper, homework assignment, test, quiz, or other class work. (See the “Doing Your Work” section for more on the types of assignments that may be required for your class.)

Preparing for Class

Instructors expect you to come to class prepared. The better prepared you are, the more you’ll get from the class. This means that you should:

- ✓ **Complete any homework assignments.**
- ✓ **Read any reading assignments** (and take notes on them).
- ✓ **Review your lecture notes** from the preceding class so that you remember what has been covered and where you are in the discussion of the topic.

In your reading or review of lecture notes, jot down any questions you have or concepts you don’t understand. If you think the class will benefit from asking the question in class, do so. (Other students may have the same questions but don’t want to say anything.) If the question is personal or limited and wouldn’t likely be of interest to the class, talk to the instructor before or after class or during his or her office hours.

- ✓ **Participate in class discussions.** Not only does this show your instructor that you're actively engaged in the course but it also gives you a chance to explore related information, express your opinion, and connect ideas to other topics you know about.

Doing Your Work

Your instructor should outline the requirements of the class at the beginning of the class (as well as remind you throughout the semester about upcoming tests or papers). Good students do their work, following the instructions given by the instructor. They also turn in their work on time. Part of doing well in school boils down to simply this: your work!

Later chapters talk in more detail about how to take good notes (Chapter 4), study for tests (Chapters 5 and 6), write effective papers (Chapter 8), and so on. The following is a quick summary of the types of work you can expect to do for your classes:

- ✓ **Homework or daily assignments:** Your instructor may give you homework or assignments that you're expected to complete within a short time span (for example, for the next class). Usually, these help you practice a concept or skill and also help the instructor see whether anyone in the class is struggling with the concepts. For example, in a math class, you can expect to have homework just about every night; these assignments help you solve sample problems so that when you're given similar problems on the test, you have had practice (and feedback) on your progress.
- ✓ **Reading assignments:** For most classes, you'll be expected to read. In history, for example, you may read a chapter about the Great Depression or other period in history. In a literature class, you may read a novel or play. You may think that you can skip the reading until the actual test or paper due date, but that's not a good strategy. First, the instructor usually lectures on content from reading assignments. If you've

Easy Points!

Often, quizzes and homework assignments — combined together — make up a good portion of your final grade. While they may not be weighted as heavy as a midterm or final exam, they can have an impact. Use these short and relatively simple assessments to boost your grade rather than drag it down.

done the reading, you can more easily follow along. Second, trying to read an entire novel (or several chapters) before a test doesn't allow you enough time to fully comprehend the information and study the main themes and concepts.

Chapter 4 covers taking notes on both lectures and reading assignments in more detail and also stresses the importance of doing your reading assignments before class.

- ✓ **Quizzes:** You may have *pop* (unannounced) quizzes or scheduled quizzes. Both help you and your instructor determine how well you understand the material you're learning about. For example, if you get 7 out of 10 questions wrong on a quiz, this raises a flag that you need to do your reading, review your notes, and study more.
- ✓ **Tests:** In many courses, you take tests to assess your understanding of the material. You may take a test at the end of each lesson. Or you may take a test midway through the semester, and then another test at the end. Your instructor should explain to you what to expect on a test (which types of questions, which book chapters are covered, and so on). You find out more about preparing for tests in Chapter 5.
- ✓ **Papers:** Some courses require you to complete a paper or research project as part of the course grade. Usually, the instructor gives you precise details about what's expected (length of the paper, appropriate topics, sources to use, and so on). You discover more about researching in Chapter 7 and writing papers in Chapter 9.

- ✓ **Other assessments:** The preceding bullets cover the most common assessment types, but your course may require other types. For example, in a speech class, you may be required to give a speech or presentation. In a science class, you usually have to demonstrate competence in lab procedures, such as dissecting a frog or identifying the internal organs of an earthworm. For an art class, you may create an art project.

