

Study Skills: Tips and Techniques

Introduction

Study Skills encompasses several different skills, which makes it a somewhat complicated topic. Study strategies, time management, and organization are all skills that should be addressed under the umbrella of “study skills”. Some teachers may even teach a unit on Study Skills. Regardless of whether or not a unit of study is devoted to study skills, all students at all levels are faced with the challenge of preparing for tests and quizzes. Usually teachers give students suggestions and directions as to how to prepare for their particular assessments. However, students often are not clear communicators of these directions and that becomes a source of frustration to parents who are trying to help at home. To that end, this packet of tips and strategies was created as a resource for parents, students, and teachers. Although it is not intended to be a curriculum guide, it is intended to be the beginning of a practical resource that will hopefully develop and grow within our educational community.

Topic One: Time Management

It is not unusual for an eleven year old child to have several demands on their time out of school. There are music lessons, religious education classes, sports practices, paper routes, etc. Along with all of these commitments these young people need to do homework and prepare for tests and quizzes. The following are suggestions to help your child organize his or her time.

Use a monthly calendar. Post a monthly calendar in a visible, prominent place in your home on which your student(s) can add due dates, deadlines, test and quiz dates, etc. Referring to and adding to a calendar is a habit that needs to be developed. Encourage your student to look at it every day and check it against his or her school Agenda.

Use the Agenda: All Scituate students have an assignment Agenda. Teachers expect their students to write their homework down every day. There is usually a classroom routine that is followed to get the students to write down their assignments. It is wise to check with the classroom teacher on what the expectation is for recording homework.

- **Set daily homework time** that is realistic and accounts for their other activities.
- **Create a homework place** in the house that has needed supplies available (paper, pens, pencils, ruler, calculator, dictionary, etc.).

Organization: Teachers will provide your child with the organization methods used in their individual classrooms. As students make their way through the grades they will encounter many different organizational systems. This exposure to different techniques, methods, and systems will provide them with personal choices as adult learners as to what works best for them. In the mean time, teachers choose the system that works best in their classroom and for their subject area. Check with your child’s teacher if you have questions about how notebooks, folders, and papers should be organized.

If no particular notebook organization method is required for a class, one practical suggestion is to date every paper given or used and keep them in chronological order in a binder for that class.

Topic Two: Study Strategies

Often the first step to preparing for a test or completing an assignment is to complain to a parent. We don't want to take this privilege away from our young students, but maybe if parents had some specific advice for their child it might shorten the complaining session.

Teachers sometimes give their students a specific task to prepare for a test, for example, a study guide to complete. However if no specific task is assigned, students often "go over" their notes or the chapter. That is not an effective means of studying. For effective studying to occur a product must be created. Listed in this section are product-oriented strategies that have a component that can indicate that studying has occurred.

The following are directions for several study strategies that may work for different students and for different types of tests and quizzes.

1. Flashcards to prepare for a vocabulary quiz

You will need 3 x 5 index cards. On one side of each card write one of the words and on the reverse side write the word's definition and part of speech if necessary.

Flip through the cards, saying each word and its definition to yourself. Once you have said the definition, turn the card over to check that you were correct. Begin to separate the words into two piles, the ones you know and the ones you do not know. Continue to go through the cards until all of the cards are in the "ones I know" pile. Then it is time to have someone else quiz you. Plan to do this over the course of a few days if it is possible.

2. Half-page flip chart to prepare for a vocabulary quiz

You will need plain paper. You will only be able to fit about seven words per paper, so plan accordingly.

Step 1: Fold the paper in half the long way.

Step 2: Write seven of the vocabulary words down the folded paper. Space the words evenly.

Step 3: Cut flaps in the paper up to the center fold so that one word each appears on each "flap" you have created.

Step 4: Fold back each flap, one at a time, and write the definition for each word so that when the flap is closed you cannot see the definition.

Step 5: Once this has been done for all of your words, you may now quiz yourself by saying each word and its definition and flip each flap after saying each definition to check that you are correct. Continue to do this until you are correct without looking at the definition.

Step 6: Once you think you know them, have someone else quiz you. Try mixing up the order in which you go through the words too.

3. Taking Inventory: Studying for a vocabulary quiz

Step one: Take inventory of what you know:

Take your list of vocabulary words and their definitions and copy the words on to a scrap piece of paper. Ask another person (parent, friend, brother, sister) to give you a definition and you tell which word it defines. Put a mark on your list next to the words with which you had trouble or did not know at all.

Step two: Now study the words you had to mark. Try at least one of the following:

Say the word and its definition out loud several times.

Try using the word in a sentence.

Draw a picture or symbol to represent the word.

Repeat step one and then two again if necessary.

4. “Splat Mat” Strategy

This strategy works well when preparing for a unit test in a content area, a reading test about a story, or a grammar test, basically anything that can be divided into distinct topics. This also is best started at least a few days before the test when you are dealing with a whole chapter or unit. It may work well the night before a quiz covering a smaller amount of material.

Step 1: Divide a blank piece of notebook paper into four sections. Using either your textbook or classnotes come up with four main topics which represent the material on which you will be tested. For example, if you were preparing for a reading test on a story, you could label the four sections: characters, setting, events of the plot, literary terms or important vocabulary.

Step 2: Using your notes and textbook, write in each of the four sections specific information that falls under each of the four headings you have assigned to each of the four sections of the paper. Do this in “bullet” format using key words and phrases.

Step 3: Once this is complete you should read it over several times. Try explaining the material to another person using this study sheet as a guide. Talking it through out loud always helps.

Step 4: Divide another piece of blank paper into four sections and write your four headings in each section. Can you fill in all of the details from memory? If you can, you know your stuff!

5. Chunking Information

Using 3 x 5 index cards, write on each “chunks” of information you need to know. If the test you are preparing for is on a chapter in a text book, you may be able to summarize each section on its own card. The sections in most of the text books are defined by headings. You can write the heading on one side of the card and the important details from the section on the other side of the card. Write the details as bulleted notes, if possible, for easier studying and retention. Use a colored highlighter to highlight key words in both the heading and in the bulleted notes. Color helps memory.

It is recommended that you create the cards gradually as you work your way through a chapter. Then as the day of the test draws near you have a flashcard set-up to review and study. It is in effect a “chunked study guide”. It tends to be easier to remember information in small amounts or “chunks” rather than in larger amounts.

6. The Cheat Sheet

When preparing for any test or quiz, pretend that you are going to create a “cheat sheet” to secretly use during the test or quiz. Take a small piece of paper or a 3 x 5 index card and using your notes, teacher hand-outs, and text book attempt to write down all information that you believe would be helpful to look at while taking the test or quiz. Once completed you may be surprised by how much of the information you can recall just from the act of creating the “cheat sheet”. If done a day or two before the test or quiz you can continue to refer to this “cheat sheet” for short study sessions.

Of course you will not actually use your “cheat sheet” during the test or quiz, but you may find that you do not need it anyway!

7. Studying for a Math Test: Using your text book

1. Find out which sections in the chapter your test or quiz will cover.
2. Do some of the problems in each section for practice. **Be sure to do the odd numbered problems because the answers to the odds are usually in the back of the book.** It is good to check that your answer is correct after doing each problem.
3. If you get some problems wrong, find the explanations and examples in the book for that type of problem. You may need a reminder of how to go about it.
4. Many text books also provide review problems for each chapter. Look for these. The best way to prepare for a math test is to practice by doing more problems!

8. Mnemonics

To remember a list you can use mnemonics. Simply take the first letter of each word on your list, in order if order is important, and create a sentence where each word of your sentence starts with the first letter of the words on your list.

For example, if you have to remember the thirteen original colonies you could make up a sentence such as: “**N**ew **h**alos **m**ean **r**ibbons include **c**ute **n**ew **j**ewels, **d**on’t **m**iss **n**ew **y**ear’s **p**arty; **v**isitors **n**ever **c**all **s**o **c**onsider **g**athering.” Memorizing this sentence allows me to remember that New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia are the thirteen colonies. They are also ordered in such a way that they could be placed on a map easily. Your sentence may not make a lot of sense; it just has to be something you can remember.

Topic Three: Taking Notes

Split Page or two-column notes: This is a simple format. Fold your paper in half the long way to create two columns. On the left side you can write questions about each section of a chapter. When taking notes from a text book, for example, you can turn the headings into questions. As you read through each section you are then reading for the answer to the question you wrote on the left, write information to answer each question on the right. You will want to space your questions on the left adequately to allow room to write the answer on the right.

You can use this format in other ways as well. You can put a main heading on the left and details that go with that heading on the right.

You can set up a vocabulary list for studying using this method as well, with the words in the left column and the definitions on the right.

If you use this method of note taking as you work your way through a chapter, you also end up with a study guide at the end to help you review for a test. You can fold the details or answers behind and quiz yourself, similar to what you would do with flashcards.

Outline Format

Using a traditional outline format to organize information is basically a way to organize information in a logical manner moving from general, broad topics to more specific detailed information. It looks like this:

I. Main topic

A. Subtopic

1. detail

2. detail

B. Subtopic

1. detail

2. detail

3. detail

C. Subtopic

1. detail

2. detail

a. sub detail

b. sub detail

II. Main topic

(And repeat the format shown above. Your main topics and subtopics can often be created from headings and subheadings in a text book with the details from the information you will read in each section of the text book.)

The above outline format can be used to organize your own writing as well. When planning an essay you can brainstorm ideas and then organize them in an outline with each of the “main topics” representing a paragraph of your essay.

Topic Four: Active Reading

Reading independently is a part of every student's life. When a student is being given credit at school for their independent reading or when a product has to be produced after reading a book that can create stress if the student does not read actively to promote comprehension and retention of what is being read. Active reading strategies include mind activities that good, mature readers do naturally, without conscious thought. For young readers these activities do not always occur without deliberate thought and training. The following are strategies to do while reading:

- Preview:** Look at material before reading and think about what you already may know about the topic. This strategy should be used when preparing to read a chapter in a text book.
- Question:** Ask yourself questions as you read. This forces you to think about the text as you read. As you continue to read, look for information to answer your questions.
- Predict:** Make educated guesses about what is going to happen and read on to see if you are correct.
- Visualize:** Picture in your mind what the author is describing.
- Connect:** Think about similarities between you and the text, other books you have read and the text you are reading, and between the world in general and the text.
- Clarify:** This happens in many different ways. You may have to clarify the pronunciation of a word or the meaning of a word. You may need to reread to clear up a misunderstanding.
- Infer:** Use the available information to understand what the author means but doesn't directly say.
- Evaluate:** Monitor your own understanding by forming opinions about what you are reading and/or seeing how new information matches what you already know.
- Summarize:** Can you recall what you have read? Can you identify what the essential information is from what you have read? Can you express what you have read in your own words?

Use an active reading bookmark: Simply keep a piece of paper or index card in your book to mark your place. As you read you can write down anything that you want to remember or that you will need once you have finished reading the book and have to write a book report of some sort. Remember to always record the page number of what you jot down on your bookmark in case you have to go back for more information.

Topic Five: Preparing for an extra help session with a teacher

If you find you need help in a subject, make an appointment for some extra help with the teacher. Usually you need to do this at least 24 hours before you would like to meet. Check with individual teachers for how and when to make appointments. Often this procedure is explained in a teacher's expectations which are typically given out at the beginning of the year. Once the appointment is made, put it on your calendar at home and in your Agenda.

Go to the appointment prepared with at least one of the following: specific questions written down that you would like to ask, a test or quiz that you took and have since corrected your mistakes, or a specific homework assignment with which you had trouble. Being prepared allows both you and the teacher to use the time efficiently and productively.