To be successful in school, there are some things you need to do. You need to attend class, lab, and clinics every day they are scheduled, read your textbooks, take notes both in class and when reading for class, participate in class discussions, and ask questions. Many sources provide information and tips on getting the most out of reading, taking notes, and studying, but you need to find what works best for you.

You should complete your weekly reading assignments prior to your lecture, as everything you can read prior to class will help. Make note of concepts you don’t understand in the textbook, and ask your instructor for clarification of this material in the next class. Even if you don’t understand the reading assignment, by doing the reading prior to your lecture, you’ll have had exposure to the content. This will help make the content of the lecture easier to understand and more meaningful since it won’t be the first time you’ve heard or seen the material.

Whether you are listening, reading, or studying, you need to be aware of your physical environment as well as your state of mind. Distractions will affect your ability to retain information. Some strategies which can help you be more successful and efficient while attending class, reading class material, and when studying for quizzes and exams can be found below.

Note-Taking During Lecture

During lecture, your notes should clarify the points you did not understand when reading the textbook or explain a concept that you struggled with during lab or clinical. Ask questions if you are confused. Be a proactive learner, and listen to the lecture rather than trying to write down everything that is said.

You don’t need to take notes on information you already know. If the content of the lecture is material that you are comfortable with and already know and understand, sit back and listen to the lecture. There might be a point or two that the instructor makes that you may want to note, but there is not a lot of benefit to trying to write down everything.

If your lectures are long and you’re having trouble concentrating, you may need to take an unofficial break. While you may not want to miss important information, it may be more beneficial for you to quietly leave a lecture for a few minutes. If you’re fighting sleep during a lecture or are unable to concentrate, you are already missing the lecture.

Note-Taking Methods

Several well-known note-taking methods are outlined here. Try them, and then use the one that works best for you.

Cornell Note-Taking System

1. Draw a line down your paper 2 1/2 inches from the left side to create a 2 1/2 inch margin for noting key words and a 6-inch area on the right for sentence summaries.
2. Record your notes in the 6-inch area on the right side of your paper during class. Use your own words and make sure you have included the main ideas and significant supporting details. Be brief.
3. Review your summary sentences and underline key words. Write these key words in the column on the left side of your paper. These words can be used to stimulate your memory of the material for later study.

The Cornell method can be used for taking notes in classroom lectures and when reading textbooks.
Mapping

Mapping is a visual system of condensing material to show relationships and importance. A map is a diagram of the major points, with their significant sub-points, that support a topic. It groups material in a visual way to improve memory. The map provides a quick reference for overviewing a lecture or a textbook chapter.

The following steps describe the procedure to use in mapping:
1. Draw a circle or a box in the middle of a page, and write the subject or topic of the material or lecture in it.
2. Determine the main ideas that support the subject and write them on the lines radiating from the central circle or box.
3. Determine the significant details and write them on lines attached to each main idea. The number of details you include will depend on the material and your purpose. Maps are not restricted to any one pattern, but can be formed in a variety of creative shapes.

Outline

An outline captures the main points of the material covered in abbreviated form and is most useful for material that is presented in a well-organized way that goes from main ideas to details or examples. With an outline, reviewing can easily be done by turning main points into questions. In addition, the outline is easy to set up and takes very little, if any, editing for notes to be easily understood.

The main points or topics start at the margin and are preceded with a roman numeral, and the major subtopics, preceded by capital letters, are indented below them. Minor subtopics, preceded by numbers, are further indented below the major sub-topics, and the supporting details, preceded by a lower case letter, are further indented below the minor subtopic. Examples should be indented under the point they illustrate.

If using this method during lecture, when the lecturer moves from one idea to another, show this shift with white space by skipping a line or two.

A major benefit of the outline method is the ability to focus on the lecture. Outlining does not require speed or great detail in the writing, both of which take away from your ability to listen to what is said. Outlining does require that you pay enough attention to the lecture to be able to outline the key ideas, which can help you retain more of the information.

Reading Textbooks

Your classes will require the use of textbooks and sometimes supplemental texts or web resources. Before the quarter begins, you should review them. Once the quarter begins, it’s important to look at your syllabi, ask your instructors which book(s) will be the primary text for the course, and concentrate your efforts on those course materials. Ask your instructor if you are expected to read the primary textbook from cover to cover. Some instructors may want you to think of your textbook as a reference, a source to review when you do not understand the material addressed in lecture or covered in the lab or clinical. Other instructors will rely heavily on the material in the textbook. It’s critical to know what material you are responsible for and what each of your instructor’s expectation is.

There are a number of textbook reading strategies that you may adopt to get the most out of your reading. Two of them are the PARROT system and the SQ3R method. PARROT is an acronym that stands for Preview, Ask & Activate, Read, Recite, Organize, and Test. SQ3R is a reading strategy formed from its letters: Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review. Both help you to see how much time and effort you need to invest in your reading assignments and describe how to get the most out of what you read. It’s critical for you to adopt a reading strategy to make sure that your time is spent productively, especially if the amount of your assigned reading seems overwhelming. One of these reading strategies may help. Try them to see if one works for you.
**PARROT System:** Preview, Ask & Activate, Read, Recite, Organize, Test

**Preview:** This step involves looking over the entire reading assignment to familiarize yourself with the concepts that will be covered and the length of the reading assignment. Previewing involves skimming the major headings, illustrations, charts, figures and anything else that stands out from the text. If there is a summary, you should read it. This helps you prepare for what's to come and understand how concepts relate to one another. As you preview, you'll begin to determine how many pages you can read in 45-60 minutes and how familiar you are with the topics.

**Ask & Activate:** As you preview the material and prepare to read, it's important to formulate questions based on the topics and subheadings. Ask yourself if anything is familiar based on your prior knowledge on the subject. Ask yourself what you can expect to learn or what you need to find out. This creates a purpose for you to begin reading. Determine the number of pages you hope to cover within the 45-60 minute time frame and where you'll stop reading for your break. You may decide to skim sections of material that you already know.

**Read:** When you read the section that you've selected, do so without a highlighter or pen in hand. Don't take notes or highlight on your first reading because everything seems important the first time you read it. There is a tendency to overhighlight or take notes on information that is not important or that you already know!

**Recite:** Reciting involves stopping to check your comprehension by saying aloud, if possible, a summary of the material you have just read, preferably in your own words. The objective of this step is to help you make personal connections to the information in the textbook. As you recite or explain the material you read to yourself, you should be taking note of how the information is organized.

**Organize:** At this step, you should organize the information in a format that will help you better comprehend and study. This may involve creating an outline, developing study or flash cards, constructing a concept map, taking Cornell notes, or some other method. It's suggested that you don't take notes on material you already know as it's not necessary. Focus on devising ways to remember complex information and materials or concepts that you'll need to know.

**Test:** Remember, you don’t know what you know, until you actually test yourself. Use the study questions and/or quiz questions at the end of the chapter, or go on-line to complete the chapter quiz to determine what information you have retained. You can also create your own questions by forming the headings, subheadings, italicized, and bolded words into questions. If you are able to answer all the questions successfully, you're ready to move onto the next reading assignment. If you get some answers wrong, you only have to go back to the section of the chapter that you got wrong. Don’t read information you already know. (Community College of Rhode Island, n.d.)

**SQ3R Reading Method:** Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review

**Survey or Scan the chapter before you read:** Take a look at the title, headings, subheadings, captions under pictures, charts, graphs and maps. Review the chapter questions or teacher-made study guides. Look at the introductory and concluding paragraphs in each section and the chapter summary. Doing this will give you an idea of the information you'll find in the chapter.

**Question while you are surveying:** Turn the title, headings, and/or subheadings into questions and see if you can answer any of them. Read questions at the end of the chapters or after each subheading to see what you already know. Ask yourself, "What did my instructor say about this chapter or subject when it was assigned?" and "What do I already know about this subject?"

**Read:** Look for answers to the questions you raised, and answer the questions at the beginning or end of chapters. Take the time to reread the captions under pictures, graphs, etc., and note all the underlined, italicized, bold printed words or phrases. Stop and reread parts which are not clear or are difficult to understand. Read only a section at a time and recite after each section. Take notes, highlight, and make notes in the margins as you read using one of these effective note-taking methods: mapping (allows visual learners to see relationships and differences); key words (help define terminology, phrases, names and people); outlines (organize information into clusters or under separate headings); and flash cards.

**Recite after you've read a section:** Orally ask yourself questions about what you have just read, or summarize what you read in your own words and say it out loud. Find a classmate who is willing to ask you questions, discuss the main points of the chapter with you, or to whom you can verbally explain the information. The more senses you use, the more likely you are to remember what you read; quadruple strength learning involves seeing, saying, hearing, and writing.

**Review: an ongoing process:** After you have read and recited the entire chapter, write questions in the margins for those points you have highlighted or underlined. If you took notes while reciting, write questions for the notes you’ve taken in the left hand margins of your notebook. When you have time to study, page through the text and/or your notebook to reacquaint yourself with the important points. Cover the right hand column of your text/notebook and orally ask yourself the questions in the left hand margins. Orally recite or write the answers from memory.

Other ways to review include developing mnemonic devices for material which needs to be memorized, and making flash cards for material or questions you find difficult to remember. After you have done so, alternate between your flash cards
and notes and test yourself (orally or in writing) on the questions you formulated. If you skim through the material or use your flashcards throughout the week, you'll be ready for your exams when they are given. You can also try randomly selecting a previous chapter to review throughout the quarter on a weekly basis by taking the chapter quiz. This will help you keep information from the beginning of the quarter fresh and lessen the amount of review for your final exam. (Landsberger, n.d.)

Getting the Most From Your Studying

It's important to understand and be honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses as a student and realize that you'll need to put into practice academic and life behaviors that will increase your success. The objective of studying is to retain information, and your ability to remember is affected by many factors such as distractions, stress, interest in the material, level of motivation, and time of day. To ensure your success, be sure to know yourself and what is best for you! Keep these things in mind:

- Don’t study in a place that has distractions for you. This could be a person, technology (iPod, texting, etc.), or a place. Select a study location that will not distract you from your task.
- Know your high energy and low energy time of day. If you’re not a morning person, don’t try to study first thing in the morning.
- Eat well and get some exercise. Practice the healthy lifestyle your future profession encourages others to do!
- Do not skimp on sleep. You should be getting on average at least 6 hours of sleep each day. Lack of sleep worsens your emotional state, your ability to concentrate, and feelings of anxiety.
- Don’t sweat the small stuff. Accept that during the semester you may not be able to maintain the same level of commitment to life’s daily chores. The house can stay messy and dinner can be a sandwich.
- Ask for help! Your instructors are the first people you need to speak with if you are struggling. Find out what additional resources are available to help you and take advantage of them!
- Attempt to maintain balance in your life. All work and studying is not healthy. Take time to do something you enjoy each day.

Articles written by Lebowitz (2015) and Lambert (2009) present study tips based on scientific research that should work for you. Some of them are listed here.

- Lambert (2009) presents a principle called “spacing effect” which was developed by B. Price Kerfoot, a Harvard physician and professor. It involves breaking up information into small chunks and reviewing them consistently over a long period of time. According to Kerfoot, this strategy helps increase knowledge and strengthen retention.
- Studying the same information in a different place every day makes us less likely to forget that information. This is because every time we move around, our brains are forced to form new associations with the same material causing it to become a stronger memory. Simply changing the location you study in improves retention (Lebowitz, 2015).
- Research suggests you can retain more information when you hand write notes rather than type them. Recopying your notes or adding them to the ones you’ve taken when reading a chapter will help with retention of the material as well (Lebowitz, 2015).
- Forming study groups is a very effective way to study. They force you to be disciplined, as everyone is responsible for being up-to-date on the material. When there are concepts that you’re not quite getting, your fellow students can help explain them to you. These groups are also a great place for brainstorming and creating mnemonics and associations that assist you in remembering. You’ll spend lots of time memorizing things, so the more help you have with this, the better (Lebowitz, 2015).
- You should also vary your study method. You can read, do flashcard review, complete the textbook's chapter quiz, discuss the material with a classmate, or ask someone to quiz you on the material you read. If there are review questions at the end of the chapter, take the time to write the answers out. Whenever possible, watch or participate in a demonstration of material you need to know, and take the lead in setting up discussion groups with other classmates to talk about and quiz each other over material covered in the classroom, lab, or clinical site. You’re more likely to remember the material if you vary the study materials and methods that you use.

The bottom line is that you need to find what works for you, so try different strategies until you come up with some that work. If you need some additional suggestions or help, please contact the Academic Support Advisor on your campus.

References


