

Effort Activity 6: Proactive versus Reactive

There are two types of work you do on any course:

Reactive work is completed in response to instruction. This includes classwork, where, during a class, a teacher asks you to discuss something in pairs, or complete a particular task, or asks you a question. Reactive work also includes homework: though you do it on your own time you're doing a task chosen by someone else with a deadline they've.

Then there's **proactive work**. This is the work you set yourself. No-one's asked you to tidy your notes or re-write a topic summary or create some flashcards – you've done it because you know it will help.

We've interviewed thousands of students and asked them about their levels of reactive effort versus their levels of proactive effort. Here's what we've found:

Entirely reactive	Mostly reactive Proactive on rare occasions	A balance of reactivity and proactivity	Some reactivity, but mostly proactive
These students <i>only complete work if they're told to</i> . They've often never set themselves any work – even in the run-up to exams, they go to extra classes and react to the instructions they get there.	These students complete almost all their work because they're told to. Now and again, if there's a crisis, they'll spend a small amount of time proactively – revising for a test or tracking down some missing notes.	These students are close to matching their reactive work with proactive work. They're regularly setting themselves work; re-reading and tidying notes, asking questions, reading textbooks and submitting redone essays.	These students get their reactive study out of the way pretty quickly, completing it to a high standard so they can get on with more proactive work. They enjoy the proactive work, exploring topics in detail and challenging themselves.
Outcomes: These students almost always get the lowest grades in the year group.	Outcomes: These learners find themselves towards the bottom of most groups, but have the potential to climb up.	Outcomes: These students tend to be in the middle or towards the top of most of their classes.	Outcomes: These students are almost always at the top of their classes, and often end up getting places at the best universities.

What does this mean for you?

A good way to ensure much better grades is to shift your focus towards proactive study. This isn't easy if you've never really done it before. Below are some suggestions for how you might do it: 21 possible pieces of work you could set yourself.

We've split them into three groups. **The easy tasks** – the first seven – just consolidate your classroom learning. Try these if you've never worked proactively before. **The medium tasks** extend you beyond the classroom work and really boost your learning. Try these if you're feeling confident. And the last seven, **the challenges**, are great if you're on top of everything and really exploring beyond the syllabus.

EASY

1. tidying and re-organising your notes, 2. borrowing someone's notes, 3. reviewing your feedback to look for patterns, 4. handing a piece of homework in early and asking for advice on how to improve it before deadline day, 5. completing a one-hour re-read and re-organise of notes on any topic, 6. attending a support class or revision session, 7. summarising a topic in a single page of notes and diagrams

MEDIUM

8. seeking a book/study guide recommendation from a teacher, 9. handing in a re-done piece of work, 10. sending five emails asking for support, help, advice or an opportunity, 11. asking five complex questions of a teacher and noting down the answers, 12. listening to a podcast related to a topic you've studied, 13. watching a video-summary of a topic, making fresh notes as you go. 14. seeking out three short exam questions related to a topic and completing them under timed conditions

CHALLENGES

15. beginning a personal project to explore a topic studied at a level above yours, 16. contacting employers or employees to ask questions, 17. volunteering to teach someone else the topics you know inside out, 18. seeking out a reading list for a subject at a higher level than yours, 19. entering a competition or challenge, 20. organising a study-visit to an employer or place of study, 21. interviewing a student working at a higher level than you and summarising their advice in notes.

Getting Started and Building Up

Starting out: In the early stages of learning to be proactive, try and complete one or two proactive tasks a week, spending about half an hour on each. Choose the 'easy' ones.

Aiming for a balance: Once you're more confident, you can up your proactive hours, closing the gap between your reactive study and proactive study until they're balanced. You might be able to do this by completing loads of the 'easy' tasks above, but the likelihood is you'll be doing some 'medium' ones too. You'll begin to see your grades improve – your teachers might even express some surprise at how well you're doing!

Hitting your stride: Once you're close to a balance of reactive and proactive, try introducing a few of the tasks labelled 'challenges' into your working week. By this time, you'll be regularly performing well in tests and exams and should feel much more optimistic and confident!