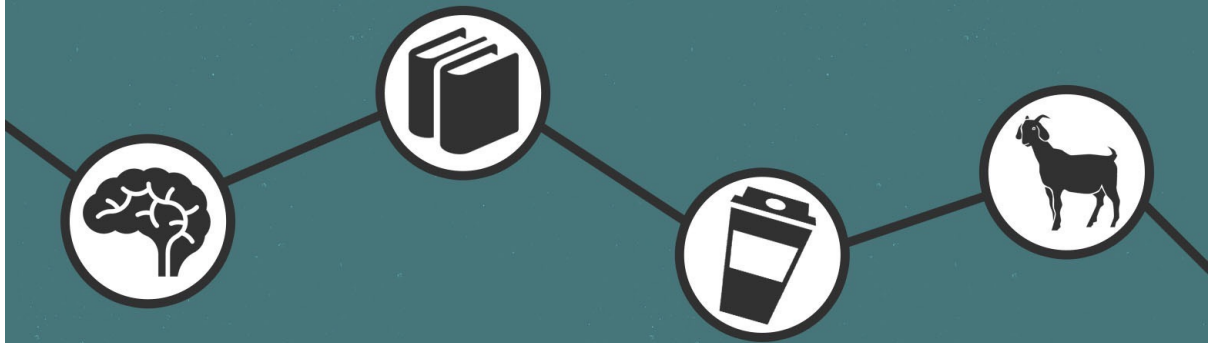


# 10 STEPS TO EARNING AWESOME GRADES

(while studying less)



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# STEP 1 - PAY BETTER ATTENTION IN CLASS

Since your Class Time is a constant rather than a variable, I think it makes sense to prioritize Learning Quality first. The more you can learn while you're part of your professor's captive audience, the less work your Study Efficiency will have to do later when you'd rather be hanging with friends and playing *Fibbage* (the best party game ever, I might add)

The first step to upgrading your learning quality is deceptively simple: **Pay better attention in class.**

This is one of those "easier said than done" pieces of advice; semesters are long and classes constantly wage a war of attrition against your motivation levels. These strategies will help you weather the storm.

## Don't Overload The System

I had a professor in my MIS program who was quite the character. In addition to praising "the Google" at least twice a week and sending students on extra-credit missions that involved photographing Cabbage Patch kids in weird locations - like Intel's chip manufacturing facility - he'd also end every class by saying,

***"Don't overload the system!"***

The system he was referring to is your brain, but I'm going to take it a step further and define the system as your body.

This isn't a huge stretch, actually; Elliot Hulse, a strongman/fitness personality with over 1 million subscribers on YouTube, has a key philosophy that **your body is your mind.**

Your mind does all the work involved in earning awesome grades, and the performance of that mind is dependent on the state of your body. As Elliot's YouTube intro video eloquently puts it:

***"The most important part of the game is your game piece!"***

I go to the bookstore and look at the college prep section a lot (it's an upgraded version of a motivational technique called *visualization*) since I want to see my work there some day. Almost every college success book I thumb through mentions health somewhere...

...but it still bears repeating. Why?

The truth is that most of us are like the kid who goes to karate class and wants to learn flying tornado kicks before mastering proper balance. We want little tricks, hacks, and tactics that promise to make our lives better.

However, all the little mind hacks and study tricks in the world won't help you if you're constantly suffering from bad health due to poor nutrition, lack of sleep, and inadequate exercise.

Picture two ninjas: One keeps his body in top form and practices every day, but his master's a hard-ass and only lets him fight with his bare hands.

The other actually isn't a ninja at all - he's just an unhealthy anime addict yelling quotes from Naruto and holding a \$5,000 katana bought for him by his rich dad.

Who's going to win that fight?

All this is an elaborate way of trying to convince you to make your health **priority #1**. Be deliberate about:

1. Eating healthy 90% of the time
2. Working out regularly - this can be fun exercise; join an intramural sport or get addicted to DDR like me!
3. Getting enough sleep - at least 6 hours a night

If you want to learn how to do these things properly, check out my friend Steve Kamb's site Nerd Fitness. There's an article there called [A College Guide to Eating Healthy](#) that might be a good place to start.

## **Sit Up Front and Be Present**

*Tap. Tap tap tap.*

I woke up from my pleasant nap at the back of the huge lecture hall to find a really attractive girl tapping on my shoulder. "Maybe she'll be down to play Crash Team Racing with me, " says my brain.

Then she hands me a Red Bull.

I guess she was paid to hand out energy drinks to sleepy students in class - either way, I didn't make a Crash Racing friend that day. I also didn't learn anything in that Econ 101 class.

Fast forward a semester, and I'm in my Stat 226 class. I am in the front row, about 6 feet away from the professor's purse. I think I can see a Power Bar sticking out of it. I kind of want it.

No matter, though - my mind is focused only on what's being presented (mainly because I know I'm screwed if I don't catch it. Stat is hard.) The only things on my desk are my notebook, calculator, and elbow. When class ends, I've filled five pages in my notebook with new statistics concepts that I *actually understand*. Also, I have not fallen asleep once, even though this is an 8 A.M. class.

See the difference? Stat is better than Econ because it doesn't give you false hope for making new Crash Racing friends.

I kid, I kid. The real difference is that sitting up front and making a *deliberate effort* to be present actually does help your focus, attention, and energy levels. And it all starts with choosing that row the moment you walk into the classroom.

## Come Prepared

Every teacher you have ever had has told you to come prepared to class. I'm not going to pretend that I'm giving you some new piece of advice just by telling you to do it.

What I *do* want to mention here is that you can become better at doing this, because none of us is perfect at it. We all forget things - and when we forget things, we create **friction** that impedes our willpower to remain fully engaged in class.

So, to make sure you're prepared in class as much as possible, create a **mindfulness habit**. To me, being mindful means regularly considering the things that your life, and your goals, depend on - especially those that lie outside the current moment.

For instance, a non-mindful student would only think to start looking for an apartment one, maybe two months before he's supposed to move. A mindful student, on the other hand, would have asked landlords a year in advance what the best time to start looking is, learned it was 7-8 months beforehand, and then started his search at that time.

Likewise, a mindful student plans for the next day each night, and thinks about what needs to be in her bag for that day. She makes sure her laptop is charged if it needs to be, and checks to see that the right notebooks are in her bag. She makes sure any files she needs are in Dropbox instead of sitting on her desktop, unable to be accessed.

If you find that you're not as mindful as you'd like to be, an easy solution is to create a reminder, such as:

- A note by your door or on your desk
- A recurring daily task in your to-do app
- An alarm on your phone

Anything that can trigger your mindfulness habit will work; eventually, you'll start anticipating it, and later you won't even need it.

## Get Help from Your Professor (The Right Way)

Your professors want (in most cases) to help you, so you should definitely take advantage of their office hours if you ever have problems understanding the material in a class.

Not only will you get the help you need, but you'll also start building a relationship with that professor. This can be incredibly useful down the line, in addition to just being a generally cool thing to do.

When it comes to getting academic help, however, you should use the **Corson Technique**. Dale Corson, the 8th dean of Cornell University (the birthplace of the famous Cornell note-taking system), once remarked that students in engineering and science programs often have to work through a complex idea one sentence at a time in order to "crack" it.

If comprehension doesn't come even at this granular level of study, it's time to ask the professor for help. However, Corson advises,

***"Before you do, ask yourself this question: **What is it that I don't understand?**"***

What he means is that you should never go to your professor, open the book and, with a "general sweep of the hand" say that you don't understand what you're reading.

Rather, when you go for help, you should be able to show the professor all that you do understand up to an exact point – and even show what you understand afterwards.

By doing this, you show the professor that you’ve really wrestled with the problem. Doing this has several benefits:

- You save the professor’s time and help them understand the exact context of your problem
- The professor knows that you actually give a damn and will have a much better impression of you
- By really going to intellectual combat on the problem, you very well might solve it yourself before you need to ask

A programmer named Matt Ringel wrote a [blog\\_post](#) a while back about an unwritten law at his company called the “**15 Minute Rule.**” This is very similar to the Corson Technique, and gives some more specific guidance on how to act when you’re stuck on a tough problem:

1. When you get stuck, push yourself to solve the problem for *15 more minutes.*
2. During that 15 minutes, document everything you do, keeping in mind that someone else will need those details if they’re going to help you.
3. After that time, if you’re still stuck, you must ask for help.

This rule is summed up in the mantra:

***“First you must try; then you must ask.”***

If you dig into some of articles on College Info Geek (my website), you’ll notice that I often talk about the importance of becoming a **Solution Finder**. To me, this is someone who knows how and where to search for answers to tough problems - and, more importantly, is *willing to do it*.

Becoming a Solution Finder will help you immensely in your college career; it’ll build habits that’ll enable you to find answers and solve problems that other people can’t. However, there’s a balance to be struck; eventually, you should be willing to seek the help of your professors when you’ve exhausted your other options.

## **Keep Those Hands Moving**

This last tip stems from an observation I made early on in college: Being an **active participant** is almost always better than being a **passive observer**.

We're more easily able to remember things that we actively participated in than things we were merely exposed to. When it comes to lecture-style classes, the best ways to be active are to speak up in class discussions and to **take lots of notes**.

Going back to my Statistics class - because I was constantly taking notes, my attention was almost always focused on the professor and the material. In other classes, my commitment to taking notes wasn't as strong, and as a result, I'd often find my attention directed to less useful things like reading old BOFH stories.

Forcing yourself to take notes can be hard, though - so you've got to turn it into a habit. To do that, you could:

- Form a study group and compare notes on a regular basis
- Use a habit-tracking tool like Habitica or Lift (more about Habitica - my tool of choice - later in the book)
- Elevate the importance of your notes...

...which I did in my first Management Information Systems class. How? **I made them public.**

That first MIS class was all about learning tons of facts and details about information systems, so I took all my notes in Evernote using the Outline Method. Evernote has a feature that lets you share a public link to a notebook, so that's what I did - and I posted the link in the Blackboard chatroom for the class.

I'm not sure how many people actually used my notes, but it didn't matter - in my mind, I had elevated my importance in the class beyond that of an isolated student, and as a result I placed added importance on the quality of my notes.

You don't have to go that far, but you should still find a way to build a habit that keeps those hands moving when you're in class.

So now that you've committed to taking notes in every class (even if you don't feel like it), the next step will teach you *how to take those notes*.