

## Introduction

College. You've probably been hearing about it and planning for it for years, and now, it's finally here. The SATs are over, your application's been accepted, and high school is soon to become just another fading memory. You're about to embark on a great adventure— one you'll remember your entire life.

There is no question that college is a lot of fun. It's four years of freedom and excitement and growth. Staying out until two A.M. partying, and staying up until dawn talking with friends. Reveling in the chaos of cramming for midterms, and discovering how to appreciate dining hall food. Learning how to write a powerful, persuasive paper, and figuring out how to transform your bedsheet into a toga. Trust me when I say that you're in for a good time.

However, there is more to four years of college than amusement. It's also the launching pad for the rest of your life. The tough truth is that getting a good job these days is hard. Getting accepted to a good law school, graduate school, or medical school is also hard. You have just four short years to prepare yourself for the world beyond your college campus. If you play your cards right, you will have the ability to engage in any pursuit that inspires you. If you don't make the most of these four years, getting started on an exciting and fulfilling life path will be much more difficult.

Is it possible to be successful at college and still have fun? When I first arrived at school, I didn't think so. I thought there was no way that you could both enjoy college life and excel as a student. As I saw it, there were two choices: you could be fun and social and put all your energy into meeting people and having memorable experiences, or you could be a grind, and while away your weekend hours studying in the depths of the library. I truly didn't believe you could do both. Until, that is, I met Heidi.

Everyone liked Heidi. She was fun and outgoing, she knew tons of people, and she seemed to exude energy. It was clear that she was having a good time at college. But here's the catch: she was also a Rhodes Scholar. Not to mention a published author in the field of mathematics, a winner of a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, and the founder of a successful community service organization for young girls.

I also met Kabir. He was a fun-loving member of a fraternity I frequented, a musician in a

popular campus jazz group, and an all-around sociable guy. However, when I really got to know him, I discovered that he was also the CEO of a start-up company, a co-founder of a grassroots mentoring program in Australia, and a rising star in the world of youth politics.

Then there was Janos, who, in a brilliant display of social vitality, somehow managed to become a member of both a fraternity and a co-ed social house—a definite fixture on the campus party scene. But this whirlwind social life didn't stop him from serving as student body president two years in a row, nor did it stop him from planning a postgraduation run for the state assembly.

Clearly, these students were proof that academic success and real-world ambitions could go hand in hand with living college life to the fullest. They seemed bounded by nothing. After they graduated, the most competitive companies would hire them, the most exclusive academic programs would admit them, and the most important people would love to meet them. They had, however, avoided the fate of those tedious students who spend their college years in a tireless pursuit of a perfect G.P.A. Instead, they were having a great time, building friendships, and all the while managing to rack up incredibly impressive achievements that would serve them well down the line. None of these students was interested in achieving solely for achieving's sake; rather, they had a natural hunger for intellectual challenge and a flair for transforming their personal interests into exciting projects. Their experiences convinced me that becoming a standout student was not only the best way to prepare for life in the real world, it was also the best way to make college memorable and fulfilling.

This is what inspired me to write this book: I wanted to find out how to be like Heidi, Kabir, or Janos. In search of these answers, I frequented the “College Life” section of quite a few bookstores, but came up frustratingly empty-handed. There were plenty of campus guides, books full of practical financial-aid information, and tutorials on how to score high on the SATs, write smart application essays, and other tricks for getting into good schools. There were books that professed to help you learn to speed-read, develop a super-sharp memory, and improve your study skills. And there were plenty of titles brimming with practical advice for surviving college—from how to do your laundry to how to avoid the “freshmen fifteen.” But there were no books about how to achieve the head-turning, interesting, and rewarding college experiences boasted by students like Heidi, Kabir, and Janos. I wanted real advice on how to do the exceptional things they were doing.

Because I couldn't find the answers I wanted at the bookstore, I went searching for them myself. I began to track down and interview top students across the country—not just the academic stars, but students who fully embodied this unique brand of multifaceted success. From the Ivy League—Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and Cornell—to Stanford, Kansas State, Wake Forest, Clemson, the University of Wyoming, the University of Virginia, and the University of Arizona, I located some incredible students, and I asked them about the habits, systems, and mind-sets that had aided them in their accomplishments. I had them write to-do lists for incoming college freshmen interested in doing well at college, and I pressed them for details about specific approaches to time management, studying, and balancing a social life with working hard. Essentially, I wanted to find out everything that made these superstars tick.

To be honest, when I first started these interviews, I was a little intimidated. I worried that I



would discover that the key to winning at college was a genius-level I.Q., an ability to go for days without sleep, or maybe even a photographic memory. But my fears were unfounded. I discovered from my research that anyone can become a standout student! You don't have to be a genius, you are allowed to get a healthy amount of sleep, and your memory doesn't have to be anything special. All you really need is some expert guidance from those who have done it before.

How should you prepare for exams and papers? What extracurricular opportunities should you look into? How should you deal with professors? What's the best way to keep your intellect stimulated and your mood upbeat? How do you balance a fun social life with an ambitious schedule? And how can you craft your pursuits to perfectly fit your abilities, interests, and passions? These are the important questions that every student needs to ask. And *How to Win at College* contains the answers.

In this book you'll find seventy-five rules drawn from the experiences of some of the country's most phenomenal students. Their answers cover the questions asked above, and more. Turn to any page and you will encounter a simple piece of advice to help you make the most of your four years. No one chapter will turn you into a Rhodes Scholar, and you certainly don't need to follow all seventy-five. However, if you select a group of rules that really captures your attention, and then take the time to implement them in your everyday college life, you will notice remarkable results. Half the battle in becoming a standout student—in fact, to becoming a standout individual—is making the decision to actively try to succeed. If you follow the advice in this book, you will be well on your way toward taking advantage of all that college has to offer, and ensuring yourself the strongest possible start in the real world that follows. *How to Win at College* will help you find that perfect balance needed to jump-start a life filled with interesting enthusiasms, impressive achievements, and wonderful acquaintances and friends.

I wish you the best of luck with this exciting new phase. Hopefully, this book will help you meet and master the many opportunities that will come your way.

—Cal Newport

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Don't Do All of Your Reading

You will be assigned a lot of reading at college. Probably more reading than seems humanly possible for any one person to complete. Social science and humanities courses will taunt you with seemingly short academic articles that turn out to be riddled with Byzantine sentence structures and devilishly complicated logic. Science courses will siphon your time, and help you develop a lifelong hatred of bar charts, with a steady stream of ultradense technical material. And just to keep things sporting, professors will periodically slip entire books into the syllabus, often giving you only a week or so to finish them. Sound bleak? It doesn't have to be. All you need remember is one simple rule: Don't do all of your reading.

To a hardworking student, ignoring assigned reading probably seems blasphemous. But as unusual as this may sound at first, covering every page of reading listed in a course syllabus is rarely necessary. Here is what you should do instead:

For reading that covers the topic of an upcoming lecture, it's often sufficient to just skim the main points ahead of time, and then fill in the gaps during class by taking very good notes. Students are sometimes afraid of skimming, but you shouldn't be. You need to master the skill of covering hundreds of pages of text very quickly. The secret is to read chapter introductions and conclusions carefully, and then skim everything else. Make tick marks next to sentences that catch your attention—this is faster than highlighting. Don't get bogged down trying to understand the significance of every paragraph. Instead, note only the passages that seem to obviously support the thesis. You will definitely miss some key points, but your professor won't. So pay attention in class when the work is discussed, and you will pick up the arguments that you overlooked. Come exam time, your lecture notes, plus a review of the sentences you marked, will bring you up to speed on the material.

If there is a particular assignment that was not covered in class, but you know that it will be part of an upcoming exam, skim over it more carefully. If you still feel shaky on the topic, go to



office hours. Discuss with your professor the conclusions of the reading. Take good notes. This combination of careful skimming and a good record of the professor's thoughts on what's important is a very effective way to prepare material for testing.

When multiple books are assigned as background for a paper, find out early exactly what your paper topic will be, and read only the material you need to develop your specific thesis. Skip optional readings. With all due respect to your professors, there are better uses for your limited time.

For science courses, you will typically be assigned one or two chapters of dense technical material to review for each class. These assignments almost always cover the exact same topics that the professor will detail in lecture. Skim these chapters quickly so you know what to expect, but put the bulk of your energy into concentrating in class. Sciences courses don't test you on your reading. They test you on the concepts taught in the classroom. Your goal as a science student should be to come away from each lecture understanding what was covered, and feel comfortable about applying it. If you find yourself falling behind the professor's chalkboard heroics, ramp up the amount of preparatory reading you are doing until you are able to comfortably follow along. In general, reading in science courses should consume very little of your time. Put your attention where it matters: class lectures and homework problems.

This approach to completing class work is admittedly an acquired skill. At first you should err on the side of caution, doing as much reading as possible. But as you gain a feel for your professors, and the structure of your courses, you can begin to back off on your assigned reading until you find that perfect balance between being prepared and being efficient. If you have ever wondered how top students can accomplish so much work in such limited amounts of time, this rule is a large part of the answer.

## Study in Fifty-Minute Chunks

According to conventional wisdom on college campuses, the most effective way to tackle a large amount of studying is to: (1) pile all of your books, notes, and review sheets in front of you; (2) study until you collapse; (3) awaken several hours later wondering where you are; (4) wipe the drool off your books with a damp, warm washcloth; (5) consume large quantities of caffeine; (6) repeat. Do not do this (except for the part about the damp, warm washcloth . . . that really is the best way to clean up drool). When you do schoolwork, be it reading, taking notes, working on a lab, or memorizing verbs, try to do everything in fifty-minute chunks. Take ten-minute breaks in between each fifty-minute chunk. This is key for any successful student.

Why fifty minutes? For one thing, there are compelling scientific rationales. Those who study cognition can draw maps of memory retention over time, and demonstrate how periods of roughly fifty minutes, divided by short breaks, will maximize the amount of material you can successfully learn and remember in a given sitting. But just as important, breaking down all your work into distinct, known periods of time provides structure for your studying. If you have five hours of reading to do, that stack of books in front of you can seem hopeless. How can you focus on the first chapter when there are so many to follow? But if you only have to stay focused for fifty minutes at a time, then the impossible suddenly seems possible. Five work chunks doesn't seem so bad. You could do three before dinner and two after, or whatever seems easiest, and suddenly your assignment is approachable. Not to mention that you are learning the material in the most effective way possible for the human brain.

In general, as discussed in Rule #7, Build Study Systems, you never want to approach any large amount of studying or reading or note-taking without some sort of structure. Using fifty-minute chunks is a great addition to any such structure.