How to Get Good Grades in Ten Easy Steps

1. BELIEVE IN YOURSELF.

• If you want to succeed, you have to believe that you can. If school has been challenging for you, believing that you can do well can be hard. But success depends on trusting that you can do it, and then making a plan to help you reach your goal.

• Remember to make small goals at first, and work towards the big ones over time. Instead of deciding to get all A’s, start with a goal of going up one letter grade in a class or two, and then decide what you need to do to achieve that goal. Every journey consists of small steps, and each one is important to get you to the destination.

• There will be people from time to time who won’t believe in you and will try to tell you Can’t do it. These might even be people who are close to you—friends, family, or even teachers. Think about how great it will be to show them that they are wrong and have underestimated how terrific you are—sometimes, turning this negative talk into a challenge can really help keep you motivated towards your goal. Just say to yourself “They can’t see how motivated I am, and how much I can do— and I’ll prove it to them that I can do it!”

2. BE ORGANIZED. THIS MEANS:

• Keeping and maintaining an assignment book. Everyone needs to do this, even adults. Without it, you can easily forget your assignments, or fail to study for upcoming tests, or do the work necessary for long term projects. One of the best uses for an assignment book is to help you learn how to manage your time, and break down big tasks into smaller ones. We’ll talk about this a bit more later on.

• Use three ring binders for class notes (with reinforcements). Tabbed separators can help you keep each notebook organized as well— one spot for blank paper, one spot for class notes, and add pocket folders that are secure in the binder.

• Use folders for schoolwork. Folders, preferably the kind you can put right in your three-ring binder, are essential for keeping track of all the work for class. You should have one for class handouts, one for upcoming assignments, and another for completed homework, so it’s always there, completed, and ready to hand in. You’d be surprised how many kids actually finish their homework, but get into trouble because they lose it and fail the most important step— handing it in!

• Keep numbers for classmates at home and in your assignment book, in case you have any questions or don’t understand an assignment. We’ve all left a book or a homework sheet at school, or forgotten to write something down we should have. But rather than coming to school with an excuse the next day, a quick call to a friend can help you get the assignment or answer a question, letting you complete the task on time.

• Keep your locker and backpack neat. This means you’ll be able to find what you need, when you need it! It’s amazing how many kids get into trouble in school just because they can’t find the work they have to do, or the work they’ve already completed. A little bit of organization goes a long way to making the “job” of school work so much easier, and less of a drag. My own kids have seen their grades improve just by adding a little more organization of their papers.
3. MANAGE YOUR TIME WELL. THIS MEANS:

• Leave enough time to get ready without being rushed. No one likes to feel rushed and pressured, and this is when people are most prone to make mistakes. This may mean getting up a few minutes earlier in the morning; laying out clothes the night before- whatever works best for you to make sure your mornings go well. It means trying to arrive to class on time or a minute or two early. The less rushed you feel, the more in control you will be, and you’ll better prepared to focus on the task at hand.

• Plan out a study calendar. If you know you have a test coming up, you are much better off studying a little bit each day rather than “cramping” the night before. Studies show that you need to repeat information many times to “encode” it into your long term memory. Cramming only leads to quick forgetting. Another great study trick is to write out outlines of the material in your own words, and make study guides for yourself. The act of making the guide gets you to use all the material in a new way, helping you to remember it. (Knowing how your memory works, and how to get stuff in and out of it easily helps you do well.)

• Break down big assignments into smaller pieces. Just like studying for a test, doing a little work each day on a project works much better than leaving it all to the end. Doing a little bit each night will prevent you from being rushed and doing a “good enough” rather than great job. Besides keeping you from being overwhelmed, this also gives you some time to ask questions if you have a problem or don’t understand something. You can sometimes even ask teachers or friends to review your work in progress to see if you are on the right track. You can’t get that help if you aren’t working ahead of the due date.

• Time Management is important for school, and for life. Time management is hard for lots of people. But time management is a big key to being successful, both in school and in the rest of your life as well. Think how upset you would feel if your friends were constantly not showing up on time, or if you were running a business and your employees never showed up on time. It can lead to big problems, and to people assuming that you don’t care or aren’t working hard. Learning how to manage your time now will pay off in big ways for the rest of your life.

4. BE SUCCESSFUL IN THE CLASSROOM. THIS MEANS:

• Get to school, on time, every day. As we said earlier, getting to school (or anywhere you need to be) on time, all the time, saves you from feeling rushed and leaves you better prepared to do what needs to be done. Just think how you feel waiting around for someone else, and how this can make you mad and frustrated. You don’t want other people, and especially not your teachers, to feel this way about you. Getting there on time shows you care and it matters.

• Learn how to adapt to different teachers. Each teacher has their own standards- for some, neatness is a must, and you should always take extra care to meet their expectations. Some teachers love classroom participation and questions. If a teacher tells you something is important, make sure to write it down. Understanding what your teachers expect from you, and
following any rubrics or rules as exactly as they set them out gives you a roadmap for success in their classroom.

• **Be prepared for class every day.** This means having done any assigned reading the night before, be ready to take notes, and have any homework or assignments done and ready to turn in at the beginning of class. Sometimes, having a question or two to ask, written down on your notebook, can help you be ready to participate in class discussions, without having to try to think of questions in the moment.

• **Take care of yourself.** This means get enough sleep, eat breakfast, and exercise. Many kids are rushed in the morning, and are tempted to skip breakfast. Don’t forget that one of the most important things you can do to be ready for school is to make sure your brain has enough energy to concentrate. Even a quick granola bar, a sandwich, or piece of fruit is better than nothing.

• **Sit near the front of class, if you can.** This makes it easier to pay attention and stay involved. Studies have shown the kids who sit in the front of the class tend to get the best grades, so don’t underestimate this simple rule.

• **Be aware of your body language.** If you look like you are slumped in the chair, head on your hand- you look bored and not interested in the class. The teacher will make judgments and assumptions about you based on your non-verbal statements, as well as what you say aloud in class. The more engaged you look, the more the teacher will think you’re trying.

• **Always do your homework.** Sometimes it may seem silly and pointless, but often there is a larger purpose, even if it's just teaching you time management skills. This also means you should always do every extra credit assignment- it helps you improve, and shows the teacher you want to go beyond the minimum in your work. Homework is like practice, just like you might practice a musical instrument or a sport- and by a bit of repetition and practice, you get better and it helps you master these skills.

• **Participate in class.** Teachers want to know you are paying attention, and that you are an active learner. This means raising your hand and trying to answer questions. Even if you get a question wrong, it's an opportunity to learn. Writing down any questions you think of while doing your homework gives you a way to participate even if you are shy in class. And remember, there really is no such thing as a dumb question- Many other kids may have the same question, but are afraid to ask. One of the best teachers ever, Socrates, was known for teaching his students through asking questions- his method of teaching is still used in schools today. Don’t be afraid to get your questions asked, and answered.

• **Be a good group member.** When you work in groups, you are learning to get along with others and listen to their ideas as well as yours. This will be important when you work with others as an adult, so it's important to learn to work well in groups now, in school.

• **Treat others with courtesy and respect.** You want others to treat you well, and you need to treat them that way, even if you don’t like them very much, or think they are contributing. Be polite, look at others when they are talking, and try not to interrupt. Be aware of your tone of voice and how you might sound to others. Say something positive to someone, like "you look nice today" or "I hope you're feeling better" if they have been absent for a few days. Thank you to friends and teachers are always nice. The more you are polite to others, the more they will be polite back- and even if they’re not, you’ll feel better knowing you are making an effort to be nice.

• **Involve your parents.** Most of the time, Mom & Dad want to know what's going on in school, and are happy to help you study. They've been through school, and may have a bunch of great study tips for you, or may help you by quizzing you on facts before a test. Every little
bit helps, and parents love it when you ask them to help you- (but please wait until they are off
the phone, not in the middle of cooking dinner, and aren't in the rest room.) Even your
brothers and sisters might be able to help you study or quiz you- it’s a great way to figure out
what you know well, and what you might need to review.

• See if you can make studying fun or a game. For some studying, like spelling tests or lists of dates
facts or definitions, you can make up a quick game to let you play and study at the same
time.

5. TAKE GOOD NOTES.

Tests usually cover material presented in class, and your notes can be a very useful study guide
before tests. Taking good notes can help you pay attention and choose out the important things
your teacher says- every time a teacher speaks louder, pauses, gives you a list of steps, items,
things, or writes something on the board- those are all important things they are emphasizing and
you should write all of those things down

• Take notes that are easy for you to read- use an outline format.
• Spread out is better than too scrunched up and illegible. Don’t be afraid to use as
much paper as you need. Don’t be stingy with your notes!
• Write on every other line, and only use one side of the paper- you may want to add
things later, or highlight information. Consider trying to use the Cornell Note taking Method,
described at the end of this document. This “tool” has helped many students, from middle school
through College take better notes and do better in their classes as a result.
• Leave a margin on each side of the page in case you need to add things later on- The
Cornell method uses this to help you take notes that make it easier to outline and study from.
• Go over your notes as soon as possible, making additions and corrections. Some
people, especially successful students in college, sometimes completely rewrite their notes, to
keep them better organized and prepared as a study guide for later on.
• Get copy of another student's notes if you are absent.
6. **KNOW HOW TO READ YOUR TEXTBOOK.**

You can scan, read and then review the material. A quick scan will give you the gist of what you are going to read; Reading will provide details, and the review will help you remember the information you just read.

7. **STUDY SMART.**

- **Finding a good place to study.** This is usually a quiet place, with a table or desk. We can tell you from experience that music, TV and video games in the background tend to distract you, rather than helping you study effectively. (Studies on memory show us that we have two loops in our brain- one for language and auditory information, and the other for physical information. Reading to yourself still uses your auditory loop, so reading and listening to music tend to interfere with each other, and you can't process as much information.)
- **Don't put it off.** Just start, and you can get it over with sooner!
- **Know how you learn best.** Some kids learn best by making flash cards. Others can study notes, others need to practice sample questions or sample tests- know what things work best for you, and try a new method, in addition to your old ways, from time to time, to see if it helps. Some people who are visual learners use diagrams to connect facts, or make timelines to help them keep things straight; other people repeat information over and over to themselves- know what works best for you. See the strategies section of this website for other ideas.
- **Organize your study time.** This means if you have a test coming up in a week, make sure you make a study schedule, and do a little bit of studying every day, rather than waiting until the last minute. Your brain will remember more this way, and you’ll have time to ask any questions that come up.
- **Know how to study for tests.** Different kinds of tests may need different study methods. For example, in math, going over sample problems may be the best way to practice and prepare. In Social Studies, you will have to think about making time lines, outlines, and maybe answering sample questions from your textbook to be prepared for the test. Don’t be afraid to ask your teacher for tips as well. Part of going to school is learning how to learn, not just memorizing stuff. You need to really understand the material, not just be able to recognize the right answer out of a list.
- **Use tricks and strategies to memorize information when you need to.** Sometimes, making up lists, poems, acronyms, codes, and the like can help you memorize a lot of information. For example, ROY G BIV is an acronym for the colors of the light spectrum, in order- Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet. You can use ones from other students, or make up your own to help you remember lots of information with these memory “clues”.
- **Know how to write a paper-** including introductions, body, conclusions, topic sentences for paragraphs- a good paper has a format and a structure, just like a scaffold- if you follow this pattern, you're sure to do well. Sometimes teachers have a particular format or rubric they want you to follow- look at this as a roadmap for a good grade, and follow it closely. If you are confused, ask your teacher to clarify what their expectations are for you.
- **Learn how to use the word processor on the computer-** it produces neat work, has spell check, and can make writing papers MUCH easier. Just a quick note here- make sure you
understand rules on plagiarism, and you make sure you don’t get tempted to use “cut and paste” and use information on the internet as your own. Make sure you know how and when to make a footnote or credit a resource. Failing to do so will make people assume you are trying to “cheat” and get you into pretty big trouble.

8. USE TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES.

- Different tests require different strategies. For multiple choices, for example, if you get confused, try to eliminate answers you know are wrong, and then you can guess between the remaining choices if you have to. Try to plan the time you use during a test well- on standardized tests, try to keep on pace, and make sure you fill in all the bubbles well. If you get caught short on time, make sure you try to put some answer down, even an outline of a longer answer- you’ll at least get some credit, rather than none. Knowing how to take tests can be just as important as knowing all the material!

9. REDUCE TEST ANXIETY

- The better prepared you are, day to day, for class and the better notes you take, the easier it will be to study for a test, and the less anxious you’ll be on test day. That said everyone has frozen on a test or panicked at some point. Try to take some deep breaths, relax, and think to yourself that you know this stuff. Try to picture your notes or your desk in your mind, and bring yourself back to where you were studying, and you may find your memory coming back as well. Make sure you get a good night’s sleep before hand, and maybe even review your notes on the way to school in the morning. All of the preparation you do in advance will make taking the test easier.

10. GET HELP WHEN YOU NEED IT.

- We all need help. Don’t expect to do everything on your own- your parents and teachers want to help you do well, and when you do well, everyone is happy, especially you. Sometimes kids have trouble with reading, writing or concentrating. Sometimes that can be due to how their brain works, and may even be due to a learning disability. Having a tutor or getting outside help during a study hall or after school doesn’t mean you are stupid- it means you are smart enough to get the help you need when you need it. Even kids who are planning to go to medical school or law school take special tutoring classes to help them pass their tests and exams, so never feel badly asking for help.