

How to Become a Straight-A Student

Summary

By Cal Newport

When you close your eyes and imagine a straight-A student, you probably picture someone who studies for a long time and has very little social life, or someone who is annoyingly and naturally gifted.

How to Become a Straight-A Student is a fun, pragmatic look at succeeding, while also enjoying college life. You don't need to grind hard or be naturally talented to excel, and Newport's research shows that straight-A students have numerous things in common, and use similar unconventional strategies to work smarter, not harder.

In Cal Newport's second book, we're given a fresh approach to learning and studying. Newport studied at Dartmouth and worked hard in his freshman year; however, he didn't achieve the results that he wanted. This led him to reassess his learning methods and adopt some strategies and hacks to optimize his studying. He met other straight-A students through the honor society, and learned some insightful things about what constitutes a well-rounded student.

Through interviews, Newport learned that grinding and pulling all-nighters isn't an effective way to study. Students who work arduously are just working harder, without the desired results, and this only leads to anxiety and stress. Obviously the people he interviewed are smart, because they managed to get into college, but what set them apart was their techniques and strategies to study and complete assignments.

How to Become a Straight-A Student doesn't negate the importance of studying. On the contrary, it's a book about instilling a passion for learning. It's an inspiring read to set you on the path towards knowledge, and through case studies, examples, and science, Newport provides us with insightful and easy to implement techniques. The book is divided into three parts: how to study, how to perform in tests, and how to write better essays and papers. We'll briefly look at some of the salient points to get you started on becoming more productive and inspired to learn.

A Straight-A Formula For Success

How many hours do you spend studying before a test? And, how many hours do you think you need to study to get the best results?

Looking around the average college campus, you'll see many students who are arduously working and grinding away. These students are often incredibly stressed and anxious, and they frequently buckle under the pressure of it all. College isn't supposed to be like this, and if you find yourself not being able to cope, it may be time to question what you're doing wrong. College should be about balancing work and campus life, and Newport's research shows that the high achievers do manage to "have it all."

Where most students go wrong, is that they believe that working hard means putting in the maximum number of hours. This is an utterly archaic principle, and research shows that just because you're spending time doing something, doesn't mean you're being effective.

Newport found that there are two kinds of work. There's "pseudo-work" and "real work." Grinders tend to labor over "pseudo-work," whereas ace

students tend to do "real work." These findings were the precursor to Newport's trademark idea of "deep work," which is the idea that working well, is about focus and intensity, not time. In order to get ahead, and this applies to everyone – not just college students, we need to get work done quickly and effectively. Working effectively means that we minimize the amount of wasted time and energy.

In true Newport style, he gives us a winning formula to help simplify this idea.

The formula is, $W = T \cdot I$, multiplied by I.

The I stands for intensity, and intensity is the factor that's going to change the game. Whereas most students focus on time, and praise time spent studying, research shows that focus and intensity are significantly more important. If we look at the formula, we can see how this works. For example, if you have a big math exam to study for, you might set aside 20 hours for studying. You might divide these hours into two days and work for 10 hours each day. However, because you're working for 10 hours straight, you're likely to be unfocused and distracted. If you rate your intensity levels, you might generously give yourself a 4 out of 10. If we look at the formula, this equates to 40, because 10 hours multiplied by an intensity level of 4 = 40. You can probably see where we're going with this?

If we turn this equation around, and up the intensity level to 10, we'd only have to work for 4 hours to reach 40. So the solution to the problem is to focus on intensity, because this drastically reduces the number of hours. This is the key to working smarter, not harder.

It's worth noting that if you're not used to "real work," or deep work, you'll

find it challenging to begin with 1 hour of focused and disciplined work. Like all of our muscles, our brain needs to be trained, so start with 30 minutes of concentrated work, and in no time, you'll be able to manage up to an hour.

Know Your Enemy

What's the number one thing that's keeping you from studying or working?

For most of us, procrastination is the major obstacle that prevents us from reaching our goals. This is where Newport is most pragmatic, because he doesn't give us a magic solution to conquer procrastination. Instead, he suggests that we identify procrastination, accept it, and try to deal with it more effectively. He also says that we're all bound to procrastinate at some stage, because there's some work, that as he puts it, "sucks." There are loads of things that we have to do that we're not going to enjoy, but if you want to be at the top of your game, and set yourself apart from those around you, you need to go to war with your urge to procrastinate.

Here's the deal, procrastination is like an addiction, and we all have to deal with it. No one is immune to it, but certain people can overcome it because they find coping strategies and don't allow it to win. Procrastination is an enemy that isn't going away, but we can win battles against it with a few well-developed strategies.

The best students apply strategies to deal with procrastination, and realize it's futile trying to conquer it. So here are five ways to overcome the urge to procrastinate.

So many of us procrastinate because we don't have a sense of accountability. It's easy to make excuses when there's no one to hold us to task. Being accountable to ourselves is a way to make sure we stay on top of our assignments and goals. The suggestion here is to keep a work progress journal. Every day, write down a list of realistic goals that you want to accomplish, and at the end of the day, tick off what you've got done. If you manage to get everything done, and you found it a bit too easy, then adjust your list for the following day. However, if you fail to check through everything on the list, you need to write down exactly why you didn't manage to get the task done. The rationale behind this, is that it's a lot more difficult to accept failure to perform if we're honest with ourselves, and have to be accountable. For example, imagine having to write down, 'I didn't write my midterm paper because I was binge-watching a series on Netflix.'

The next strategies deal with developing a tight schedule and routine. Procrastination is more likely to occur if we're low on energy. As we know from *Eat Move Sleep*, energy requires food, exercise, and sleep to be at 100%. Hence, "feed the machine" by ensuring that you've scheduled enough sleep, exercise, and healthy meals.

This links to the idea that in order to perform most efficiently, we need to create a solid daily routine. Start working or studying once you've woken up, and build "real work" blocks into your day, until you get to dinner. Schedule your blocks of high-intensity work, with shorter blocks to rest. The motivation to start as soon as you wake up, is because this is when our brains are at their best. Furthermore, schedules are often interrupted

by other events or things that come up unexpectedly. If we get an early start, it'll mean that we can account for interruptions to our routines.

When scheduling, we also need to make sure we space out our work and don't have too many hard days in a row. It's also okay to have a rest day if you feel that you've worked intensively for long enough. Newport is a strong advocate for taking breaks and enjoying life. He argues that the best college students manage to work effectively all day, and then be able to relax and enjoy themselves in the evening.

Finally, make an event out of the worst tasks. There are some tasks we really battle to sit down to. In cases such as these, Newport suggests adapting our environments. He argues that we're more likely to perform a task we don't like, if we incentivize ourselves to do it. So, perhaps find a quiet coffee shop and enjoy a cup of coffee and a treat while you study, or seek out green space like a park.

When, Where, and How?

We've established that the earlier we start studying, the better. It's a good idea to study when we wake up, allowing us ample time to enjoy ourselves in the evening. However, studying also happens in class. No matter how tired or hungover you may be, going to class is absolutely essential if you want to be a straight-A student. Getting into the habit of missing classes will mean that you're regularly playing catch-up on the material. Keeping on top of your work also means you won't be tempted to cram everything at the last minute.

The best place to study is somewhere where you're isolated. Find a variety of places conducive to studying, so that you can change your

environment when you need a change of scenery. The key to intense and focused work is that there are no distractions.

The number one tip for effective studying, is that you shouldn't just read and re-read your notes. No matter how thorough your notes are, they will become nothing more than a crutch. Reading and re-reading provide us with what's known as the "fluency illusion." The fluency illusion is when we think we know the material because we've read our notes so many times. Reading and re-reading give us the illusion that we grasp everything. However, when it comes to actually recalling this information in a test situation, we realize we have massive knowledge gaps. The lesson here is that to prevent the fluency illusion, remove the crutches to studying, and quiz yourself. You should know your material so well that you could stand up and teach it. In the same way as a good teacher doesn't read from notes or a textbook, you should be able to recall and explain your subject.

Newport also provides numerous tips on how to study for various subjects. For example, if you're studying for a subject like history, the advice is to write structured notes around developing an argument, and then repeating the argument aloud. If you're studying for math, an excellent way to learn is to quiz yourself to assess comprehension. Flashcards are useful if you need to memorize material. Straight-A students are in the habit of carrying around flashcards so that they can quiz themselves throughout the day. We've learned that it's useless to study for more than an hour at a time, and that we need to focus on taking regular 5-10 minute breaks. This is known as distributed learning. So whatever you're studying for, make sure that you adopt the principle of distributed learning.

What's In the Exam?

How do you feel about writing exams?

For many of us, exam time is stressful, but Newport says it doesn't have to be. There's a technique to exam writing, and provided you're well-prepared, this should alleviate a lot of the unnecessary anxiety.

Once you mastered the formula of intense "real work," gone to battle against procrastination, and learned how best to study, you can begin focusing on exam preparation. The first thing to do is to strategize your learning. You need to identify what's relevant, and what's likely to appear in the exam. Attending lectures and classes will assist you with this, because often lecturers drop hints about what to expect. Being a straight-A student is all about paying attention and engaging with the course material.

Furthermore, when going through each section of work, you'll intuitively know which details are most important. You'll know this by familiarizing yourself with each topic and argument. Newport suggests getting "Academic Disaster Insurance," which will ensure that there's no subject you're unfamiliar with. The key to Academic Disaster Insurance is to ask questions throughout the semester, engage in lectures, consult with your lecturers, and have discussions with classmates. Learning and retaining information is about engaging and being proactive, so don't just think all you need to succeed comes from your notes.

Writing an excellent exam is all about being well-prepared and confident. However, there are some tips and strategies to write a good exam. When

you get the exam, immediately start planning your approach. This will prime and prepare your brain for what's to come. Once you've read through the exam, create a plan and time frame to answer each question, and make sure that you leave an additional ten minutes at the end.

Begin by answering the questions that you find easiest to answer, and then move onto the more difficult questions. By taking this approach, you'll not only engage your brain straight away, but you'll gain confidence and will lay a solid foundation for the rest of your answers. Finally, spend the last ten minutes proof-reading and editing your exam script.

"A-cing" That Essay

Writing papers and essays is a big part of college life, and therefore you should make the most of them, and enjoy the experience.

Newport explains that the best way to start writing a paper or essay is to identify a topic that you find fascinating, and want to get started on immediately. Whether or not you enjoy this research and writing experience depends on when you start it. Nobody enjoys writing when they're under pressure or unclear of what they need to write about. Therefore, it's crucial to spend time thinking about a topic that interests you. The great thing about college assignments is that they come with a lot of freedom to formulate unique topics based on a broad subject. When we're genuinely interested in something, it's a rewarding and enriching experience, and straight-A students manage to find what interests them, and then develop ideas around that. Before you begin the research and writing process, it's a good idea to scaffold your paper and break it into sections. You'll find it a lot easier to research something when you know what subjects and topics you have to cover, and what areas you need to fill in any blanks.

Remember that college is a time to find out what interests you, so keep an eye out for potential topics to write about. Once you've identified a topic, start broad and then narrow your focus. When it comes to research, all of your main ideas should have at least two sources, and then for additional ideas, it's okay to rely on one key source. Research is about knowing when you have enough information, so don't waste time over-researching and going down rabbit holes. In short, know when to stop.

As with studying it's a good idea to take regular breaks. The best thinking often happens when we're doing mundane tasks like washing the dishes or taking a shower. You might find that taking a break allows you to find inspiration. Another way to up your inspiration and creativity levels is by reading and engaging with a variety of articles, essays, and discussions.

You may think that you've completed your essay once you've typed the final word. However, every straight-A student knows the value of proper editing and proofreading. The first thing to ask yourself is whether your argument hangs together, and if your essay has any missing information. You also want to check for clarity when you do your first "big picture" edit. Next, print out your document and edit it with a pen or pencil while reading it aloud. Once you've done this, make the edits and print it out again – you're a lot more likely to identify typos on a hard copy document than on a computer screen.

The last step is to sit back and genuinely enjoy and appreciate the paper you've written. You should be proud of the document you submit.

In Conclusion

How to Become a Straight-A Student, isn't a book to help you pass or achieve good results for the sake of it. Neither is it a magic wand to get you to where you need to go. It's a book about teaching us the value of focus and discipline, which makes the pursuit of knowledge a more exciting and rewarding endeavor.

In an increasingly stressful world, where there's lots of disillusionment about the future, this book gives us helpful strategies to take back some control. College shouldn't just be about doing it "because you have to," or doing it "because it's the thing to do." Education is about gaining new knowledge and skills, and having fun while doing it. Furthermore, by excelling at college, you'll open the door to much more opportunities and experiences.

Having a greater sense of autonomy allows us to take control of our lives

and to be responsible for our future. What's more, Newport shows us practical skills to develop, which will enable us to apply our knowledge to real-world experiences. At the end of the day, intensity, focus, and discipline are resources that are becoming increasingly rare. If you can harness these resources, you'll add tremendous value to the world.

It is your choice whether or not you want to become a straight-A student; you just have to ask yourself, 'Do I have what it takes to do focused and intense real work?'