

## 5 Bad Study Habits You've Probably Been Following

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/5-bad-study-habits-youve-probably-been-following.html>

You hear a lot of platitudes when it comes to studying: “Make studying a priority. Review your notes early and often.” “Read all the textbook chapters and do your homework.” “Practice makes perfect. So practice as much as you can.” First off, all the students who have ever been in a classroom just collectively rolled their eyes. Second, most of this stuff we hear, though well intentioned (maybe), is just plain wrong. A lot of bad study habits are spread in the guise of helpful advice. Here are 5 of the most common bad study habits that parents, teachers, and advisors teach, and why they're actually hurting your GPA:

### 1. Read the chapter before lecture

Here's something we've all heard teachers say at the end of class: “Read chapter 12 on the Law of Cosines before class tomorrow so that we can jump right in.”

And you probably wanted to say, “Wait a sec... isn't that your job?” Anyway, no one does it (except maybe that guy who always sits in the front row). Even if we tell ourselves we're gonna “get organized” and prepare before lecture, no one ever does the reading. And if you do, it's usually a lackluster skim effort. But would it actually help if we did? Should we actually care about “getting organized” and doing the reading before class?

**Research suggests that this is a waste. An initial review period is necessary to learn something new, but further review becomes less and less effective.**

So why would you review something twice? Well, because repetition improves your ability to recall something later. Practice makes perfect.

Not so fast. While it is useful to get a quick “lay of the land” on a new concept before going into lecture completely cold, beyond an initial introductory period to a new concept, your ability to remember, recall, and use that information does not improve with review.

What you need instead is testing and use. So that valuable time before lecture is much better spent quizzing yourself on the information from the previous lecture. Stuff that you'll eventually see on the midterm or final, rather than some arcane explanation from a textbook.

Use the lecture the way it was intended: to introduce you to new material.

### 2. Get a study buddy

As you walk through your campus library, you see them everywhere: books scattered across tables, empty energy drink cans, and problems scribbled on pieces of paper or whiteboards.

Study groups.

Some people can't stand to sit with other students for hours on end racking their brain over chemical reactions or Freudian psychology, but others can't get enough of it and seem to find any excuse to meet up and "go over" the latest lecture notes.

So who's got it right?

**Studying with someone else can help you stay accountable, but that's pretty much all it can do.** Yes, knowing someone is waiting for you at 4pm at the library is motivation enough to get your butt out the door, and crack that notebook that otherwise would stay on the floor in the corner of your dorm room. But **doing practice problems with another person is the quickest way to fool yourself into thinking you can reproduce it yourself on an exam.**

It's one thing to watch someone solve a tough physics problem and nod along saying "oh yeah, got it." But it's a completely different thing to actually reproduce that problem-solving method during crunch time, staring at a blank sheet of paper.

So definitely still make friends in your classes, and keep each other accountable. But limit working on problem sets together to those couple of sticking points you still have after working through everything yourself. Then go back a day or two later and make sure you truly understand it well enough to reproduce it yourself.

### 3. Review your notes after class

Passive review of your notes is not only time-consuming, it's also been shown to be completely ineffective. And yet, this is what most teachers recommend. It's what "good students" do.

But as with habit #1, **this robotic type of study is not suited to the way the human memory system stores new information.** Again, it's far more effective to test yourself instead.

**Try to re-create the key concepts or solve a few practice problems without referring to your notes from class.** Do this again a day or two later. Studies have shown that this self-testing method is a much better use of your time than simply "refreshing" a dead page of text. The only time you should touch your notes is when you're going to try and re-organize and consolidate them into a more simple and compact form.

### 4. Find a quiet space and make it a daily habit

"Turn off the music! How can you concentrate with that on?"

"Stay still and be quiet. Just sit down and focus."

Sound familiar?

This motherly advice is typically in response to multitasking teenagers who text, listen to music, have Facebook open, and are Skyping with a classmate while doing their homework.

So yes, in that case they may have a point. But the other extreme actually may be detrimental to future performance on exams.

**Routinely studying in exactly the same quiet place is the best way to ensure that you can only recall that information reliably in that one spot.** In essence, you're training yourself to completely blank on that information when test day comes, when you're thrown into an anxious mental state, under time pressure and sitting in a foreign environment (unless you happen to have one of those chairs in your apartment with the desk so small you can barely fit a piece of paper on it).

**What you should actually do: study in widely varying contexts.**

Studies have show that learning new information in different environments, at varying noise levels and even mood states, can significantly improve your ability to recall that same information when test day comes.

So mix it up. Quiz yourself on the treadmill. Lecture your roommate while playing Call of Duty. Do practice problems standing on one foot, using a fountain pen, while listening to ACDC.

And even better: go to the classroom where the exam will be held, pick out your seat, and do a practice exam in the same exact amount of time allotted for the test. Now that's context-specific learning.

## 5. Refresh topics in your memory often

“If I can just keep reciting my study sheet for the next 24 hours, I'll have it on the tip of my tongue during the exam.”

The problem with always feeling like you're on top a new concept is that you're committing what psychologists call the “fluency illusion.” **Just because it's easy to recall piece of information now, does not mean you won't forget it later.**

And in fact, the easier it is to recall, the less likely it is that you will be able to remember it in crunch time.

Studies show that **some level of forgetting is actually necessary in order to improve the “retrieval strength” of a new memory.** Bjork's study recommends looking for a level of “desirable difficulty” with learning new information—e.g. it should be hard to remember how to solve limits using L'Hopital's Rule if you really want to make sure you can remember it on test day. So do this: Learn it once during lecture. Then give yourself a self-test later that night, without referencing your notes.

Then wait two days. You'll feel like you've forgotten everything. But resist the urge to study your notes again.

Instead, test yourself again and struggle through, trying to pull as much of the material as you can from the depths of your memory. Each piece of information you can recall becomes more and more bulletproof to forgetting on the exam. And even wrong answers have been shown to benefit you.

Then, and only then, go back to your notes and see where you were right and where you were wrong. Make the appropriate corrections and then repeat the process.