

Success in Psychology

Students committed to learning will find many possible paths to success. No path is error free, but the path best for you may not look like the same path as another student. For this reason, students should continuously assess their academic progress in courses and adjust their academic strategies accordingly.

While there is no magic formula, the following suggestions may improve your ability to succeed in psychology and increase your retention of knowledge.

The information was adapted from <http://cornellpsych.net/studytips/> and <https://www.verywell.com/>

Tips:

1. **Use the SQ4R method of reading:** Reading a book and studying a book are two different things. Before you read, **S**urvey the chapter. **Q**uestion while you survey by turning the title, headings and learning objectives into questions. When you begin to **R**ead, look for answers to your questions, re-read captions and study graphics. **R**ecite by orally asking yourself questions after each section. **R**elate what you have already studied in class – how are these new concepts similar/different? How do they build on one another? **R**eview is an ongoing process. Other active studying strategies include: taking notes on the text by jotting down one or two main point for each section, testing yourself using the headings as questions and starting with the summary in the back of the chapter which can give you an idea to the main points.
2. **Pay attention in class:** You will miss out on concepts presented in class that you can't make up for during private study time.
3. **Take good, handwritten notes:** Many studies show that the act of physically writing out notes (in comparison to typing them on a laptop) aids in thorough understanding of the material. When we handwrite our notes, we have to be selective and succinct about the information we write down, as opposed to writing verbatim like we can with a laptop. If your professor speaks too fast and you simply can't keep up, it's okay to take notes with a laptop – just make sure you then physically rewrite your notes later.
4. **Study for recall rather than recognition:** Study as if you will be filling in the blank with no assistance rather than for a multiple choice test in which you study to familiarize yourself with terms. This provides a deeper level of understanding. Many tests in psychology require to recall a theory, and apply it to another situation. Studying for recall helps in successfully answering these questions.
5. **Read widely:** Some professors use essay questions and reading all around the subject in various other texts or other references online will help you gain a mastery of the subject.

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6. **Consider a study group:** After you have studied alone initially to concentrate on the material, think about studying in a group. You share insights and everyone emerges with a better understanding of concepts and also you may use it to help prepare for tests.
7. **Review past exams:** This help prepare you for possible types of questions and you can use these as a practice exam. If these are not available, change the section headings into questions and practice answering them as short or essay questions.
8. **When in doubt, draw it out:** Use diagrams and other model maps such as compare and contrast charts to connect concepts to help you understand what is being presented in class and in the book.
9. **Study actively, not passively.** Think critically and deeply about the material. Ask yourself how the concepts connect to other material you have covered or other things you know (“Oh, this is just like X” or “Oh, that’s something my friend Johnny does all the time”). Do not simply memorize bolded terms, definitions, or facts. Know what these concepts are and how they apply to different situations.
 - a. **Think of real-world examples:** While the book or your professor might give examples of how a theory has been shown in an experiment, or in the real-world, take some time to think about additional examples. This process of creative thinking will help you to more easily study and recall these concepts. Just make sure you are coming up with accurate examples!
 - b. **Use the self-reference effect.** Things that have personal relevance are easier to remember and are learned more deeply. Take advantage of this fact by attempting to relate psychological concepts to your own personal experience. For example, don’t simply read about the identifiable victim effect; generate a time when you saw an ad on television for a specific needy child in Africa and think about how this may have affected whether you donated or not relative to the presentation of a number of meaningless statistics about the number of starving children. When it comes time to remember what the identifiable victim effect is, you’ll have a nice, handy, vivid example from your own experience to bring to mind. Many studies show that incorporating auto/biographical information into our studying aids in long-term retention.
10. **Remember the hindsight bias:** Seeing the answer to a question makes you think you knew the answer all along, but when it comes time to spit these ideas out on a test, it’s often not such an obvious response. The solution is to cover up the textbook and test yourself rather than simply reading everything in the chapter. What very often happens with many would-be psychologists is that they think that many of the findings that they read are simply common sense and do not study nearly as much as they should. You now know better.
11. **Remember the overconfidence effect:** Be sure to give yourself the opportunity to overlearn. You should spend time reviewing material even if you think you already know it. As a general rule, you should consider each concept or idea that was presented this week at least three times before you can be confident that you have had enough exposure to it. Think of your first reading of the chapter as a kind of familiarization process. It’s really only on the second and third consideration of the material that it

begins to sink in and real learning takes place. With each time that you review the material, try to make new connections to previous things you have learned; don't just memorize passively.

12. **Sleep.** Researchers have uncovered considerable evidence that much of the consolidation of memories from learning that takes place during waking hours occurs when we sleep. Be sure to get at least 6 hours the night before tests, and try for a total of 8. You can be confident that time spent sleeping after a grueling study session in which considerable learning has taken place will be time well spent. For this reason, avoid pushing your studying into the day of the exam. Also for this reason, consider attempting to review everything you have learned for the day for just 5 minutes before bed. They'll be the most productive 5 minutes of your day.
13. **Take up to a ten-minute break every hour.** Although your brain is only 2% of your total body mass, it consumes over 25% of the glucose in your body. In other words, a surprising amount of the energy that you consume goes directly to your brain. Two tips related to this fact: First, take breaks during every hour that you study. You'll be thinking about the material anyway, and your brain needs a rest. Not only that, but we learn things better when studying is distributed over time. Second, feed yourself, and feed yourself properly. Don't try to engage in a long study session with only candy bars and French fries in your stomach. Remember that stimulants like caffeine, adderall, and ritalin suppress hunger. If you use these, you often have to force yourself to eat regularly. So *avoid* stimulants!
14. **Some tips for effective textbook studying:**
 - a. **Always take notes on the textbook chapters:** This is an important exercise that forces you to actively consider the material. It seems inefficient in the short-term, but because you'll need to consider the material at least three times before you can be confident that you've learned the material adequately (see above), you'll be rewarded when it comes time to review the material and study for the test.
 - b. **Take advantage of the tools provided in the text:** Two in particular are noteworthy. First, each chapter starts with a vivid example that will help to frame the topic and make learning the material easier. Never skip this beginning section as it will help to organize the material in your mind and research has shown that we often remember organized, structured ideas and often forget disorganized facts. Second, the chapter always ends with a summary. Be sure to read this carefully, even if the entire chapter made perfect sense to you. What seems obvious during a first reading can become hazy after you've let the material sit for several days. Reading the summary will help to organize information at the time of encoding and make retrieval of that information considerably easier when it comes time to spit it out on a test. Read these summaries again when it's time to review the chapter.
 - c. **Make note of chapter headings:** Don't let yourself get bogged down in the details of a lengthy chapter. It's important not only to understand each individual concept in a chapter, but also how they're all interrelated. Why was the concept discussed in this chapter and not in another? What

was the purpose of a particular experiment? What concept did it provide empirical support for? Your note-taking can help considerably here. Don't simply write down statements as they appear in the text. Write down each concept, and use a hierarchy of bullet points to help you organize the material and indicate how everything is connected. This will help you avoid losing sight of the forest for the trees. Without recognizing the structure of an outline, the majority of pages are just a jumble of psychology experiments. This is especially important to realize when it becomes time to review. As you're reconsidering the material, you'll have a nice, organized structure to follow that will help you pin the experiments and findings onto something sturdy in your mind.