

Preface

Studying is what we do in order to learn about subjects, regardless of whether they are those that are taught in school or that we learn on our own. Study skills have to do with the *way* we study. For the most part, students learn many of their study skills through a process of trial and error, rather than in any formal, structured way. These skills may have met most of the academic demands in grade school, but starting around the seventh grade, things change. Courses become more abstract, begin to move at a faster pace, and cover more material. Increasingly, students find they are expected to be independent, self-sufficient learners.

Some students enter school thinking they know how to study. They are bright, they have been academically successful, and they earned pretty good marks in earlier grades. Then they take their first test, and they do not earn the grade to which they had become accustomed. Those old study techniques no longer work quite so well. Suddenly, some of them even seem to be inefficient or inadequate; they just cannot keep up with the new, higher academic demands. Still other skills that are now needed were never learned. Some students will successfully adapt, but many—probably most—will need varying amounts of help. They need to be shown new, more effective ways to study.

Because you are reading this book, it is safe to assume that you are not happy with the way your students are studying and that you want to help them. Perhaps you sense something is not working for a specific student but cannot quite identify the problem because you have never considered all of the

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individual, yet intermeshed, strategies that fall under the banner of “study skills.” Maybe you realize that learning study skills by trial and error just does not work in today’s fast-paced world. You want to demonstrate some skills to your class, but you only know a few. This book is designed to help you realign your students’ existing study skills and to introduce others. My intent is to give you strategies that will help the learner to cope successfully with those newer, more difficult courses. I will introduce you to some very powerful study skills that can be used in every discipline and throughout life, as students become lifelong learners. First and foremost, I, like you, am a classroom teacher. I am not about to give you skills that exist in some abstract realm that is unconnected to what you and I experience in our classrooms; I use all of these skills with my students, and they work.

I had middle school teachers in mind as a primary audience as I wrote this book. It is in those grades that students learn so many fundamental skills, whether they are physical (how to play a sport and work as a member of a team) or behavioral (how to treat others and themselves). While middle school children learn many academic skills (how to perform various math functions; write a well designed, cogent paragraph; think like a historian; or speak another language), they are rarely taught the skills of studying. Students are left to discover them on their own. That is unfortunate because time is just too short and today’s academic demands have become too great. Students often do not find the requisite skills without help; this book is designed to enable you to give that help.

Teachers who work beyond the middle school grades will also benefit from learning the lessons I offer. I taught high school biology for the first 15 years of my career, and as I taught that subject, I would also help students improve their note-taking or test-preparation skills. I watched as they gained confidence and became more proficient scholars. I truly realized I was on the right track when one girl dramatically raised her test scores by more than 30 points! Through experiences such as

these, I began to sense that my real job was to teach more than just subject matter.

These strategies can be taught in a number of venues. I weave study skills into my science classes throughout the year. For example, I might demonstrate how to annotate a text when I give out the first assignment of the year. The history teacher can advise students about how best to prepare for essay questions when the class is reviewing for an upcoming test. Appropriate note-taking skills can be explored by the English teacher when the class discusses the symbolism in a novel. Teaching study skills in context is natural, and the students will be much more receptive and amenable to learning them when they are introduced this way.

Small, extra-help groups or tutorial sessions are also ideal environments for imparting study skills. I even teach study skills when I hold parent conferences. I often ask the student to be present with the parents. I probe into how the student studies, explore how the parents are involved in the process, and then offer suggestions. In each case, whether I am instructing a class, working with an individual, or helping a family, I teach the technique and explain why it works. I start by summarizing what the student is doing. For example, in a parent conference, I might say to the student, "Let me see if I have this right. You study for your test the night before, after you have done your other homework. You read over your notes until you feel you know them. You then have your mother or father quiz you, and you seem to know the material. But when you take the test, you do poorly. You no longer seem to know anything, and now you are really frustrated." I want to verify that I understand the problem, and I also want to convey the message that I empathize with the student and really want to help. Then I offer a "diagnosis." In this case, I would say, "There are several things that we will work on that will help you, but what stands out is that you are not giving yourself a chance to memorize, to internalize the material. You are only becoming *familiar* with it." I want to establish that I recognize the problem, that I know how to

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solve it, and that I have become a partner with the student. I would then explain how we think information becomes stored in long-term memory and why it is so easily forgotten if it is not properly consolidated. My intent is to give the student and parents enough information so that studying is no longer a mystery and to suggest that doing well on tests is not just a matter of chance. I want them to be able to understand why the techniques I am about to recommend really do work. I want to empower them, and I want to increase the likelihood that the student will be able to grow.

Some students need a few simple tune-ups while others need more in the way of major overhauls. Over the many years I have worked in classrooms, I have encountered very few students who did not want to succeed; they just did not know what to do. Oh, they knew the right phrases—"I just need to take good notes," "I should listen more carefully," or "I should start using study cards"—but they rarely knew how to translate those catchwords into practice. At best, they were studying inefficiently; at worst, they had serious gaps in their study skills. They were left to their own devices . . . and they were floundering. Sadly, they were not earning the grades that were commensurate with their abilities, and they were becoming discouraged.

Middle school is the perfect time to begin to learn better study strategies. The brains of most elementary school children are not developed well enough to handle much more than the most basic skills, but by middle school, those brains are far enough along in the maturation process and are ready to learn these more sophisticated techniques (Carraway, 2003).

Incorporating new study strategies into an existing behavioral framework is not easy. A few students might try one or two skills for a while, but in all probability, they will revert to their old, ineffective ways after the novelty wears off. Changing behaviors is hard to do. Although we can, and should, teach study techniques to large groups, the lessons are more likely to be internalized when we work one-on-one with a student, providing ongoing support. But I am a full-time teacher and cannot give lengthy, individual attention to every student every

day (although I will make sure a student who has trouble remembering to turn in homework has done so and give praise as it is submitted, or walk by another student and ask how the study schedule is coming along. These brief, focused connections provide powerful reinforcement). For that reason, I strongly believe in collaborating with a coach: usually a parent or guardian who understands the skill and to whom the student must report on a regular basis. This person needs to provide positive reinforcement and encouragement during those fragile, early days when the new skill feels awkward and is most likely to be abandoned. It is easier to keep repeating a skill until it has been internalized if the student works in partnership with an adult.

Just as we are awkward at first when we learn a new skill on the playing field, we stumble and make mistakes when we learn a new study skill. The coach's role is to help the student move through this beginning stage and to give support so the student will not feel he or she is a failure. The coach becomes the student's temporary source of self-discipline during this learning period. Through conversation, the coach provides positive, constructive feedback so the student can see more clearly how the new study skills help. The coach stays with the student until the new skill becomes an internalized behavior, a habit. I frequently talk with the student, and I stay in constant contact with the coach, too. I ask the parent-coach to check in with me every few weeks, and I notify the coach of changes I observe in class. Learning new skills involves a true partnership.

My second audience consists of those people who will act as coaches. I hope parents who want to help their children will read this book, especially if they are going to take on the role of the coach. Parents and study skill coaches need to understand each skill and understand how the strategies I discuss complement each other.

I like the way students talk about studying. They are delightfully honest about their feelings, so I used their own words to introduce each topic, writing as if a student had sent a letter to an advice column. For the most part, I answered the letters the way I talk to students in order to model what I say when I talk

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about study skills. I well remember when I was asked questions like those in this book in my first few years of teaching. I frequently fumbled for an appropriate response. I hope some of these questions sound familiar and that my responses help you add to your own repertoire of teaching strategies. I also hope this approach makes this book more interesting for you because, let's face it, studying is not the most riveting subject.

The letters are grouped in sections, starting with an introductory, general section. It is really foundational and sets the stage for the other sections. In it, I explore the barriers that block growth. Even though deep inside, children may want to change, they sometimes find it hard to take that frightening first step. After confronting those obstacles, I explain why we need a coach. In the second section, I look at those skills and strategies associated with organizing notebooks and taking notes. Too often, we teachers are unaware just how difficult it is to take notes, and I offer several suggestions that will help students in this task. The next section is devoted to an examination of homework. I give tips on how to keep track of assignments, suggest where homework should be done, and give advice about the construction of a study schedule. In addition, I explore ways in which to read informational textbooks. Test preparation and test-taking strategies are examined in the fourth section. I devote the last section to exams because they are unique, as tests go, and they need to be approached a bit differently.

I know some skills could have been placed in more than one section, and that is one reason why you should read all of the letters. While I recommend that you read these letters in order, you can also pick and choose, jumping around to find those skills that you need to learn first. But you will find that each skill is connected to other skills. They complement and reinforce each other, working together to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness with which a student learns. For that reason, you might just want to begin at the beginning.

While some of the strategies I mention have been around for decades, others are new. Our understanding of how the

brain functions and how we learn is changing at an incredible rate. Research has explained why some of those old strategies work so well and has also revealed entirely new ways to study. At times I refer to how the brain works because the more students understand how they learn and why a specific study skill works, the more likely they will be willing to try out and practice that strategy.

Do these techniques work? Will the results be worth the effort? The answer is yes, to both questions. Some strategies are fairly easy to learn, while others will be harder. Some techniques will result in immediate (or almost immediate) improvement, while others will take longer before they begin to work. But effective study strategies do work. How much improvement you will see depends on many factors: how well the students like the subject (it is much harder to learn a subject we do not particularly enjoy), their state of mental and physical well-being (it is harder to study when we do not feel well or when we are tired), and how easily they learn. Some students can memorize relatively quickly, while others need much more time to get the same material locked into their brains. In other words, not everyone who employs these study strategies eventually gets an A+ average, so I won't hold out any false expectations. Nevertheless, there will be improvement, and that should be the goal we set for our students.

That said, improved grades should not be our only goal. Study skills teach organization, which gives us greater control over our lives. Giving students this kind of power should also be a noteworthy reason to teach study skills. The organizational skills that they learn now will help them throughout their lives.

Teaching study skills is hard work; it requires tremendous patience, tenacity, and sensitivity. We need to realize how hard it is to change a behavior. What does it take to change study strategies? The answer is a very strong desire and some real effort. Very few changes involve a quick fix. There is no silver bullet; changing study habits requires hard work on the part of students. The student has to *want* to change, and be willing to stick with it; he or she even has to be willing to give up

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some freedoms. Most students had more freedom when they did not study effectively. They just glossed over their work, so they had more time to play. Some barely went through the motions when they did an assignment, so they didn't tax their brains too much. Now they are going to have to sweat a little and spend more time at their studies. The question is, are they willing to make the kind of effort required to learn more effective study strategies? Will they persevere, even if the new techniques feel a bit awkward at first and do not produce immediate improvement? Will they keep trying a new strategy, even if it takes them a bit longer to do their work for the first few weeks? Do they have the courage to try new things?

There used to be a saying in the garment district in New York City: "Ya don't get nuttin' fer nuttin'." Students will not develop more effective study strategies unless they make a real and sustained effort. Most students cannot do this alone; they will need someone who becomes a partner in the process. In addition to teaching the study skill, you have to become that partner, supporting and inspiring the student. If you are willing to give this a try, read on. I think you will be thrilled by what you learn and by the gifts that you will be able to give your students, and I am honored to be part of the journey you are about to undertake.

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Have you ever seen a flock of Canada geese flying overhead? One goose always flies in the lead position at the center of the V-formation. The other geese spread out behind, each honking its support for the leader, ready to help if needed. The lead goose must feel that sense of partnership, and I suspect it flies all the better for it. Being the lead goose is not unlike writing a book. Authors do not write alone; many people become involved in it, lending their encouragement, support, and expertise, and helping the author to succeed. Among the many people who have helped me are those in the school where I work. In that incredible place, I developed my craft and finally discovered the more spiritual nature of teaching. If we strip