ACADEMIC TACTICS FOR FRESHMEN

*Editor’s note: The author of this brief document is CSUN history professor James E. Sefton. As he explained in a recent email (3 Oct 2013), this is just “the latest version of [an] ancient and honorable document”:*

*I wrote it first about 30 years ago, as a 6-page outline to accompany an hour presentation in my lower division courses. I wrote [another version] when I was NCAA Faculty Athletics Rep in the 1980s. I recently pared it down to a two-pager.*

The transition from high school to university is not a seamless one. There will be difficulties and challenges. However, the following suggestions will help ease the transition and get you started on the road to academic success.

1. Plan in advance an intelligent selection of courses for each semester. Courses must be well balanced, so that in each semester one or two courses with extensive requirements, or in subjects of known personal difficulty, are balanced by others which the individual will find less troublesome.
2. Remember that a course, any course, (1) represents an intelligently organized body of material; (2) has a particular structure of interrelated requirements, and (3) has certain goals regarding the acquisition of information, exercise of intellectual abilities, development of skills, etc. With these ideas in mind, find out as much about the course as early in the semester as possible, from the first class sessions, from the syllabus, and from conversations with the professor.
3. Obtain all required books for the semester as soon as possible, even those not required until after midterms. Familiarize yourself with the basic contents, organization, style, and level of difficulty for each one.
4. Adopt an efficient, comprehensive method of preserving and filing lecture notes, outlines, and other course material. Remember that the basic purpose is to have information at hand in usable form when you need it for exams.
5. Remember the four things central to any academic endeavor: to read, to think, to write, and to articulate. There really is no replacement for any of them.
6. Make it a habit to arrive for class on time, every day, with the assignment read, or project completed. Turn ALL cell phones, text-messagers, smartphones, websites, etc. completely OFF.
7. If you have a friend in the same class, that makes it easy to study together. But never assume that it means you can split the attendance duty. Remember that note-taking is an intellectual process, not a purely mechanical one, and that you must employ your own mental processes, rather than someone else’s, in order to prepare for exams.
8. Some professors give specific weekly assignments. Follow their schedule carefully because it means that there is a close, deliberate relationship between reading assignments and class work. Other professors identify a large block of material to be read by a specific date several weeks in the future. This merely means that you have more flexibility, not that procrastination is acceptable. Indeed, it is well to compile all of your academic responsibilities for the whole semester into a single academic calendar when classes start.
9. Underlining or highlighting textbooks is a very passive activity that quickly becomes mechanical rather than reflective. It also requires rereading the entire book before exams. And never assume that an apparently neatly underlined second-hand book will save you work. The previous owner might have gotten a D. Reading and writing together are mutually reinforcive, because they exercise different parts of the brain. So, prepare short summaries of your text chapters, including specific information and general conclusions. Do not copy verbatim. Write in your own words. This helps to convert the author’s intellectual property into yours.
10. Studying and reviewing are not the same. Studying is careful, intensive attention to a block of subject matter upon first encounter. Reviewing is the second or third pass, usually at a more general level, before an exam. The effectiveness of reviewing depends directly upon the efficiency of the prior studying.
11. Success often depends on how efficiently you spend your study and review time, not how much time you spend. So, maximize efficiency. Have a specific goal in mind for each session, and accomplish it. If you have a study group, everyone should prepare the same material and then exchange points of view and understanding. Do not simply assign a separate chapter or portion to each person in an attempt to minimize work. Again, it is a matter of using your own mental processes rather than relying on someone else’s.
12. Do your academic work in a quiet place free of distractions, whether personal or electronic, and where you can write easily.
13. At the first sign of difficulty in a course, confer with the professor and seek advice. Never wait until the end of the semester; by that time, the accumulated damage of inefficient studying or other errors may be too great. A professor who never gets a chance to help you with a problem early enough may not be able to help much at all.
14. Take the initiative by asking, individually, if the professor will review your lecture notes, or read an answer to a text chapter study question, and evaluate them for you. This can be especially helpful if you are insecure about the material or if there is a 6-8 week interval between exams.
15. One of the most important ingredients for success is the right mental attitude. Students who show that they are concerned about their progress, who show that they have goals and purposes which are significant to them, who respond to challenge, and who are willing to accept responsibility for their academic ventures, will find that faculty respond with interest in them.
16. Effort, competence, and initiative are among the most important qualities a student can possess. As an old professor used to say, “Do things right! Make it happen!”