

HOW TO BE AN EXPERT LEARNER

Three Key Characteristics of Expert Learners:

- 1. Actively Engage:** Expert learners *actively* engage with material to be learned. They are *not* lazy thinkers or passive readers/listeners. Mel Silberman (1996) coined the Active Learning Credo:
What I **hear**, I forget.
What I hear and **see**, I remember a little.
What I hear, see, and **ask questions about** or **discuss** with someone else, I begin to understand.
What I hear, see, discuss, and **do**, I acquire knowledge and skill.
What I **teach** to another, I master.
- 2. Take Responsibility:** Expert learners take responsibility for their own learning. They view learning as *something they do for themselves*, not something that is done *to them or for them*. Stop and think about that. It's quite different from what most of us are raised to believe.
- 3. Practice Self-Regulated Learning:** Expert learners use specific processes to motivate themselves and to guide their own learning. These processes can be summarized in a model of *self-regulated learning--SRL--*a key term for this course! You'll be introduced to the cycle of SRL very shortly.

What Makes Expert Learners Different?

Based on these three key characteristics and on related research findings, we can come up with several specific ways that expert learners or self-regulated learners differ from less skilled learners. Expert learners:

- Control the learning process rather than become a victim of it
- Are active, not passive, in their approach to learning
- Are motivated (e.g., enjoy learning, have specific short-term and long-term goals, etc.)
- Are disciplined (i.e., have learned good habits and use them consistently)
- Are more aware of themselves as learners (e.g., know their own strengths and weaknesses)
- Initiate opportunities to learn
- Set specific learning goals for themselves
- Have a larger repertoire of learning strategies from which to choose
- Know not only *what* to learn, but *how* to learn
- Plan their approach to learning
- Monitor their learning while it's happening (e.g., notice when they're not learning and adjust their learning approach)
- Are more adaptive because they *do* self-monitor while learning
- Reflect more upon their own learning
- Evaluate the effectiveness of learning approaches and strategies
- Are more sensitive to the demands of specific academic tasks
- Use learning strategies selectively
- Use learning strategies strategically
- Tend to attribute failures to correctable causes
- Tend to attribute successes to personal competence

Best of all, **expert learners ultimately learn more with less effort**. There's definitely a learning curve, but the pay-off is amazing.

How Do They Do It?

The short answer is "by consistently applying a model of **self-regulated learning**". Study tips include:

- **Attend classes.** Don't think you can teach yourself from the text. Your professor identifies the highlights and important points of your textbook. Besides, professors tend to test more on lectures than on assigned reading.
- **Know your instructor.** Find out what the instructor expects. Talking to students who already took the course is a great help. The syllabus also is invaluable—refer to it often.
- **Schedule regular study periods.** The best way to learn is through regular review. Set aside a specific time to review; otherwise you will most likely not review. Schedule other events around your review time.
- **Be realistic.** When you make up your schedule, decide how much time you really want to study and divide that time among your courses. Don't dedicate too much time and energy in one subject at the expense of other subjects.
- **Establish a regular study area.** Studying in the same place at the same time helps condition your mind. Your mind will automatically kick into gear once you sit down to study.
- **Study short and often.** Your brain takes in information faster and retains it better if you do not overload it. Frequent repetition is the key to building your memory. If you wait too long between study sessions, you may forget a good portion of the material you already covered.
- **Start study sessions on time.** Once you have a schedule, stick to it and be punctual. Train yourself to use every minute of your scheduled time.
- **Study when you are wide awake.** The majority of students work most efficiently during daylight hours. That is why it is wise to use the minutes and/or hours between classes to study or review. This adds frequency without marathon, brain-overloading sessions.
- **Set a specific goal for each subject you study.** You will accomplish more—faster—if you set a specific goal for each study session. It is better to say, "I am going to complete the outline for my marketing paper" than to say, "I am going to study marketing."
- **Start assignments as soon as they are given.** This is one of the most important tips. A little work each night on a problem set or a little work each week on a large paper/project will allow you time to give attention to its quality. You will be less stressed as the deadlines arrive. Also, you will have more time to study for the exams at the end of the semester.
- **Study your most difficult subjects first.** You are most alert when you first sit down to study, so you'll be in the best shape to tackle the tough stuff. You'll also feel better getting the worst out of the way, and you won't be tempted to spend all of your time on easier or favorite subjects.
- **Review your notes regularly.** This is worth repeating. If you review regularly (aloud, if possible), you will only have to review subject matter *before* exams and not *learn* subject matter.
- **Take regular breaks.** A good rule is 10 minutes of break for every 50 minutes of study. The breaks help rejuvenate you.
- **Vary your work.** Your brain likes variety. It is good to do a combination of reading, taking notes, doing homework and writing papers.
- **Problem solve.** Math, chemistry, physics and statistics are best learned through doing exercise problems. Most of the testing in those subject matters is problem solving.
- **Reward yourself.** When you complete your goals for the evening, reward yourself with a magazine, snack, movie, television or visiting with friends. It is wise to do the reward and socializing after your goals are reached, not before.
- **Keep on top of it.** Once you get behind, it is very difficult to get caught up. If you need help in time management, study skills or subject matter, get help immediately rather than putting it off.

Preparing to Study: A Good Study Place. You need a good study place to be prepared to study. You should be able to answer **YES** to all of the following questions:

1. **Is my Study Place available to me whenever I need it?** Your Study Place does you little good if you cannot use it when you need it. If you are using a Study Place that you must share with others for any reason, work out a schedule so that you know when you can use it.
2. **Is my Study Place free from interruptions?** It is important to have uninterrupted study time. You may have to hang a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door or take the phone off the hook.
3. **Is my Study Place free from distractions?** Research shows that most students study best in a quiet environment. If you find that playing a stereo or TV improves your mood, keep the volume low.
4. **Does my Study Place contain all the study materials I need?** Be sure your Study Place includes reference sources and supplies such as pens and pencils, paper, ruler, calculator, and whatever else you might need. If you use a computer for your schoolwork, it should be in your Study Place .
5. **Does my Study Space contain a large enough desk or table?** While working on an assignment or studying for a test, use a desk or table that is large enough to hold everything you need. Allow enough room for writing and try to avoid clutter.
6. **Does my Study Place have enough storage space?** You need enough room to store your study materials. Be sure you have enough storage space to allow you to keep your desktop or other work surface clear of unnecessary materials that can get in the way.
7. **Does my Study Place have a comfortable chair?** A chair that is not comfortable can cause discomfort or pain that will interfere with your studying. A chair that is too comfortable might make you sleepy. Select a chair in which you can sit for long periods while maintaining your attention.
8. **Does my Study Place have enough light?** The amount of light you need depends on what you are doing. The important thing is that you can clearly see what you need to see without any strain or discomfort.
9. **Does my Study Place have a comfortable temperature?** If your Study Place is too warm, you might become sleepy. If it is too cold, your thinking may slow down and become unclear. Select a temperature at which your mind and body function best.

Having a good Study Place is important for good studying.

Good Test-Taking Skills. For any exam you take, read the directions carefully! Then follow these tips:

1. For short-answer exams

- Budget your time. Estimate how much time you have to answer each question. If some questions are worth more points than others are, plan to spend more time answering them.
- Do easiest questions first. Don't dwell on any particular question. You may come up with the answer as you work on a different question.
- Answer each question. Write what you do know even if you don't know the entire answer. Writing may trigger your memory.
- Use the full time allowed. Never leave early. Review your answers, make corrections, add more information, etc.

2. For essay exams

- Read all questions first. Underline key words, such as "discuss," "explain" and "compare." Then jot down your initial thoughts. Create a mini-outline.
- Start with the easiest question. Organize your thoughts into a simple outline. Draft your answer, leaving space between the lines and the margin for corrections and rewrites.
- Be realistic. Answers should be logical and clear, but they don't have to be literary masterpieces. Use short, simple sentences to make your points.
- Answer more difficult questions last. When you are finished, go back and add more details, illustrations, etc. Correct any errors. Make changes as neatly as possible.

3. Objective exams (multiple choice, matching, true/false)

- Solve in the order given. Answers to previous questions may help you answer questions later in the exam. Don't get hung up on the tough questions. Leave them, mark them for identification and move on. Return if time permits.
- Read each choice carefully. Beware of words like "often," "sometimes" and "always." Select the answer that is most correct.
- Think as you read. Multiple-choice questions can be tricky. Be sure you understand what is being asked.
- Finish the exam. Go back to answer any questions you skipped. Use all the time you are allowed. Narrow down choices as best you can, then make an educated guess.

Taking Effective Notes

1. Read assignments and outside material *before* the topic is discussed in class.
2. Sit close to the front of the room.
3. Record notes.
 - A. Use full-size, 8½ x 11 paper.
 - B. Keep notes from each course together.
 - Loose leaf with pockets is best.
 - Spirals with pockets is second best.
 - Use tabs or dividers for both.
 - C. Date each day's notes
 - D. Take notes on one side of the page.
 - E. Write legibly.
 - F. Abbreviate recurring terms: make a key.
 - G. Abbreviate common words.

use "&" for "and"	use "w" for "with"	use "~" for "approximately"
use "ex." or "eg." for "example"	use "<" for "less/less than"	use ">" for "more/greater than"

- H. Mark exam or due dates announced during a lecture.
4. Use modified outline form.
5. Watch for signals of importance.
 - A. Write down what is put on the board, overhead, PowerPoint.
 - B. Always note definitions and enumerations.
 - C. Listen for words like *"important," "main," "a chief reason,"* and *"don't forget."*
 - D. Note points that are repeated.
 - E. Listen for voice clues, notice gestures.
6. Write down at least one example for complex or abstract ideas.
7. Catch the details which connect or explain main points.
8. Use blank space to show:
 - A. Where material was missed. Make a note in the margin or insert "?".
 - B. Where one idea ends and another begins. Just skip two to three lines.
9. Ask questions if you're confused.
10. Take notes during discussions.

Maximizing Your Textbook

1. **Finish reading before marking.** Never mark until you have finished reading a full paragraph or headed section and have paused to think about what you just read. The procedure will keep you from grabbing at everything that looks important at first glance.
2. **Be extremely selective.** Be stingy with your markings, but don't be so brief that you'll have to read through the page again when you review.
3. **Use your own words.** The jottings in the margins should be your own words. Since your own words represent your own thinking, they will later be powerful cues to the ideas on the page.
4. **Be brief.** Underline brief but meaningful phrases rather than complete sentences. Make your marginal jottings short and to the point. They will make a sharper impression on your memory, and they will be easier to use when you recite and review.
5. **Be swift.** You don't have all day for marking. Read, go back for a mini-overview and make your markings. Then attack the next portion of the chapter.
6. **Be neat.** Neatness takes conscious effort, not time. Later when you review, the neat marks will encourage you and save time, since the ideas will be easily and clearly perceived.
7. **Be systematic.** There are many ways to mark the text: single and double lines; the use of asterisks, circling and boxing for important items; and the use of top and bottom margins or longer notations. If some of these ideas appeal to you, work them into your marking system, one or two at a time. But use them consistently so you will remember what they mean at review time.

For additional information on learning skills, visit the Academic Achievement Center in E-216. You may also want to consider taking one of the following courses:

	ACHIEVEMENT MOTIVATION GES 111 Three credits (Free Elective)	CAREER PLANNING SEMINAR GES 121 Three credits (Free Elective)
Designed For	Students who want to improve their chances of succeeding in college by learning motivational techniques, developing academic skills, and building a positive attitude toward education and learning.	Students who want to thoroughly examine the career decision-making process in order to choose the career that is best suited for them.
What you will learn	Students will learn the tactics, strategies, attitudes, and motivational techniques commonly used by successful college students. Students will learn how to develop a positive attitude toward education and how to eliminate the self-defeating behaviors that are barriers to academic achievement. Other topics include: time management, goal setting, memory improvement, creative problem solving, critical thinking, effective communication, and other skills necessary to help students with their academic and career goals.	Students will learn how past experience as well as current interests, abilities, and values influence their choice of careers. Through self-assessment testing and other means of self-discovery, students will be able to identify careers that are consistent with their values, interests, and abilities. Students will then have the opportunity to research related careers and to interview people currently employed in those careers. Students will learn how to become more effective decision-makers.
	PERSONAL GROWTH & DEVELOPMENT GES 129 Three Credits (Free Elective)	COLLEGE SUCCESS SEMINAR GES 100 One Credit (Free Elective)
Designed For	Students who want to maximize their unique potential for personal growth. It is also appropriate for those students who plan to enter a career in the helping professions.	All new students entering their first semester at NCCC. (Success seminars also offered in: Math, Business, Office Technology, Life Science, Nursing, Communications/Media Arts, and Technology)
What you will learn	Through the use of selected readings, group discussion, and structured group activities, students will explore topics such as: self-esteem, values clarification, communication, assertiveness, relationships, and self-responsibility.	Students will receive a very thorough orientation to NCCC and the General Studies curriculum. In addition to learning how to navigate the college maze, students will learn a variety of strategies and tips that will help them succeed at NCCC.