

Mindsets for Learning

You study, you work hard, you spend long hours reading, reviewing, writing. You do all you can to succeed in your academic pursuits. But hard work is only part of the success equation. You also need to think about yourself as a student and learner in a healthy, productive way.

Consider:

- **Grades aren't everything.** As a Northwestern student, you care about doing well. Grades are important, in that they give you a sense of “where you are” academically and are necessary for many post-graduation endeavors. But, ironically, they can also get in the way of learning. When you aim only to get a particular grade, you may be focusing with such laser precision on doing well on assessments that you miss out on learning more broadly. Allowing grades to loom large can increase your stress and anxiety, which can negatively impact your well-being and your performance. And if you have the impression that everybody else is sailing through tough courses, you've got a case of “duck syndrome”: not noticing the mad paddling going on underneath that smooth surface glide.
- **If you do everything perfectly, you don't learn.** The most substantial learning comes out of making mistakes, figuring out what went wrong, and correcting your course. If your quarter isn't going the way you'd hoped, take the opportunity to think about what you might change going forward. For instance, are there new study techniques or time-management practices you could adopt? Is there a lifestyle change you'd like to make? Can you go in for help more frequently? Do you need support with stress or anxiety that might be getting in your way?
- **A “bad grade” doesn't mean you lack ability.** When you get a grade that is lower than what you'd hoped for, it's easy to jump to the conclusion that you just don't have the gift for the task at hand. But more likely than not, there are other factors at play. You might be using study strategies that aren't working well for you. You might have current stressors that get in the way of your ability to focus. External forces like classroom structure and stereotype threat (the added pressure we feel when we worry we might be judged based on our social identity rather than our abilities) can also get in the way. You won't always have control over the factors that derail your plans, but your ability to adapt, grow, and develop remains intact. Ask for help, stay focused on your values and goals, and identify small changes you can make in order to stay true to them.
- **You are here to grow.** No Northwestern student comes “fully formed.” Whatever your prior experiences, skills, and talents, you have room to develop, and it's how you measure up to your own past performance that counts. Comparing yourself to others is usually counterproductive, because your profile is unique. Focus on furthering the knowledge and skills you already have, and stick with the (sometimes painful!) process of gaining the knowledge and skills that you haven't mastered — yet.

- **You need to feel well in order to do well.** We all go through rough patches. If you're feeling unwell physically or emotionally, you won't be able to perform at your best. Think of college as a long-term goal: you want to maintain the energy to keep working and learning for four years, give or take. Taking good care of yourself means sleeping enough, eating well and exercising, spending time with friends and other people who are important to you, and engaging in the activities you find meaningful. When you need help, seek it out. Great resources on campus include [CAPS](#), [Health Promotion and Wellness](#), the [Women's Center](#), [AccessibleNU](#), [Religious & Spiritual Life](#), [ASLA](#), and the [Writing Place](#).

Would you like to talk with somebody about academic challenges you are facing? [Make an appointment with](#) an ASLA staff member. Your academic advisor and faculty members are also great resources.

More information at northwestern.edu/asla. Questions? asla@northwestern.edu

See [accompanying video](#).