

Smart Studying

You're at Northwestern because you're an excellent student, and you no doubt have found strategies for success that have served you well throughout high school. But college brings new topics, new demands, a new environment, new pressures, and new challenges. If you're like most Northwestern undergrads, you'll find that at some point, the strategies you used to excel in high school are no longer serving you well. It's a good idea to take time early on to assess your learning strategies and consider what you might want to revise. Some key ideas to keep in mind:

- **Manage your time – don't let your time manage you.** Even if you were busy in high school, you no longer have the built-in schedule structure that you had there. Your time is more unstructured, your classes probably meet less frequently, your instructors are more hands-off, and there is nobody helping you track what you should be doing when. So, ramping up your [time-management practices](#) is essential. Some tips from experienced Northwestern undergrads:
 - **Use a planner.** It can be old-school notebook-style, or an app. Plan out your week so that you don't have to think each day about what you need to do. And start at the beginning of the quarter, using your course syllabi to fill in assignments and due dates. Consider [tracking your time](#) to gain a better sense of how you're filling your days.
 - **Don't be afraid to say no.** It's hard to turn down opportunities – whether a friend's offer to hang out, a party, or an opportunity to get involved in an organization. And it's natural to worry about missing out. But you don't need to do it all. Choose what's most meaningful to you, and remember that opportunities will be there in the future, too.
 - **Know when to stop studying.** Investing time in studying pays off, but at a certain point, you face diminishing returns. If you've been at it for hours and have exhausted yourself, you're probably not really absorbing the material you're working with, or generating the creative work you'd like to produce. Take a break, sleep, or do something else for a while. You'll feel better and more productive afterwards.
 - **Take advantage of downtime.** You'll probably have many breaks during the day, between classes or other activities. Try taking advantage of that time by tackling small projects that don't require sustained attention. Even 15 minutes of reviewing notes, looking through flashcards, or editing an outline can make a difference.
 - **Watch distractions.** Staying [focused](#) is hard, and even harder with internet and social media there to distract us. Try turning your phone over, silencing alerts, and closing potentially distracting browser windows. You can also consider a [distraction-blocking app](#). A study buddy or "accountability partner" can also help you stay on track.
- **Spread out your studying.** You've heard it before: [cramming isn't useful](#). It may help you do well on a test immediately afterwards, but your long-term retention will suffer. Studying for a shorter period in each session over a longer stretch of time will help you more in the long run than studying for a long stretch during just one or two sessions. [Varying what you study](#) also helps. Interleaving, or shifting from one topic to another, enables better long-term retention and performance than studying just one topic for a lengthy period, and then another.
- **Read interactively to understand.** When you read a textbook chapter, essay, or other material, approach it with an [intention to understand](#). Jot down questions as you read, and note areas of confusion or ideas that are sparked for you. If you are reading material that you need to remember for a test, try to explain key points in your own words. Find connections among ideas. Do practice problems. And avoid the mistake of reading something and thinking to yourself

“Makes sense; I’ve got that” – because recognizing a correct answer or explanation does not mean you are able to generate that information on your own. Challenge yourself as you’re studying, and you’ll be more prepared for exams, projects, and other assignments.

- **Study with others.** While solo studying has its place, studying and working with others can bring extra benefits. When you study collaboratively, you’re exposing yourself to new ways of thinking and approaching the material, and you’re forcing yourself to explain your ideas out loud, which allows you to more easily see where you may not understand something as well as you’d like. You’re also putting more than one mind to a task, which often means a greater likelihood of arriving at the best solutions or outcomes. You’re getting to know others better, too, and you’re helping out your fellow students! For something a little more formal, consider [forming a study group](#) with others in your classes, or sign up for an [ASLA study group](#).
- **Take care of yourself.** You’re in an environment where everybody is working hard and taking on a lot, and it’s easy to slip into an “I have to do it all” mentality. But if you don’t take time for rest, connecting socially, and engaging in the activities that are meaningful for you, you won’t feel good and you won’t be able to perform at your best. Sleep is critical to your health and cognitive abilities, so don’t deprive yourself. Eat well and exercise. Take breaks and have fun. Connect with people you care about and who care about you. And if you’re struggling, reach out for help. [CAPS](#), the [Women’s Center](#), [Health Promotion & Wellness](#), [Religious & Spiritual Life](#), [ASLA](#), and the [Writing Place](#) are all excellent resources.

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](#).