University of Colorado Denver

PSYCHOLOGY 1005 - INTRODUCTION TO PSYCHOLOGY II

HOW TO TAKE THIS COURSE

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I wish I had a nickel for every student who's ever come up to me and asked how they can do better on tests. Wait… I do have a nickel for each student! That's my salary! Anyway, to save time and to get you started in the right direction, I've compiled a list of many useful skills that students pick up somewhere in their college experience.

This document comes from over thirty years of working with students (and my own experience as a student for years before that!). I've noticed some patterns; I've listened to my students and teaching assistants; and I've read a lot, especially the work of Wilbert J. McKeachie and Richard VanDeWeghe, who have been studying how students learn for decades (see the full references to their works at the end of this document). As a result, I've put together some advice that I hope you will find useful.

You will find many skills, techniques, and strategies in this document. Try them! Try at least one new thing each class, each module, each week, even each day. Learn how to learn! As you try out new things, remember that you may need to practice them before you get proficient. But they can't hurt….

Here are the sections of this document:

HOW TO BECOME A GOOD COLLEGE STUDENT

You've gotten into a really good college! So, why do you need this document? I'll tell you why: because ***college is different than high school.*** Many of you did very well in high school without trying as hard as you could. One of the observations I've made over the years is that the "smarter" students who didn't have to work that hard in high school to achieve good grades often struggle in this course. It's the students who had to work their you-know-what's off who often do better. Why? Because they've *learned how to learn in a variety of ways.* They've honed a variety of skills.

Some Ways That College is Different Than High School

One way in which college is different than high school is that you are pretty much on your own to take advantage of learning opportunities. Professors figure it this way: You're an adult, and you're paying (or somebody's paying) for these learning opportunities. Professors don't keep the kinds of close tabs on you that your high school teachers did.

Another way in which college is different than high school is that you need to do more in college than memorize a lot of stuff and spit it out or recognize it on tests. In college, many professors want you not only to learn stuff, but to *use* it as well. To *think* about it. To *consider* it. To *apply* it (see next section). In general, we're talking here about *interacting with the material* you're learning. You can't just expose material to your eyes and ears and hope that it will "sink in." It doesn't. It usually just sinks. This course will give you opportunities not only to recognize course material, but to *use* and *interact with* the material you are studying

College is an interesting kind of partnership: If you uphold your end of the bargain by being engaged in the learning process, our teaching will be much more effective. It's critical for you to know that I'm always willing to answer questions and talk with you, that my TA can help, and that other students are really good sources of advice and support.

Skills That Educated People Use to Learn and to Think

Here's a partial list of the skills that you will learn in college and use throughout your life. We will be practicing many of these skills every time we meet in an effort to increase your ability to learn material and to think for yourself. They are in no particular order. Notice that some (maybe most) will be ones that you are not (yet) good at even though you have been a good student.

1. Notice (Observe): One of the basics! You've heard of "powers of observation," no?
2. Wonder: Be curious. If you're not, make believe you are!
3. Question: Question yourself, the readings, others.
4. Discover: This is not just noticing or reading what people say, but creating your own knowledge.
5. Read Actively: Reading implies understanding, not just retinal images!
6. Memorize: This is only one of many skills.
7. Visualize: Imagine what's there, what's not there, what could be there, etc.
8. Reflect: This is sometimes called "self-reflection." "How does this relate to my life?"
9. Clarify: What?
10. Speculate: "What if …?"
11. Elaborate: "What else …?"
12. Anticipate: Look ahead. Preview your readings. How will you contribute to class?
13. Name: Use vocabulary, don't just recognize it.
14. Hypothesize: This is a more precise way of imagining, speculating, and anticipating.
15. Connect: See (notice) relationships among concepts, observations, etc.
16. Apply: This is another way to use vocabulary and make sense of your noticing. Applying includes generating your own examples of what you are learning.
17. Consider different perspectives: Looking at facts, observations, etc., from more than one vantage point helps you appreciate the complexity of life. It also helps you become more objective when you observe.
18. Evaluate: Form opinions.
19. Compare: Do more than just connect concepts or examples to each other.

20. Generalize: Take what you've learned elsewhere and apply it.
21. Infer: What are the implications of this knowledge?
22. Collaborate: Work with others to help develop your own, and others', understanding.
23. Listen: Along with noticing and these other skills, it can work really well.
24. Empathize: Figure out why and how others get so passionate about what you're trying to learn.
25. Communicate, in writing and orally. If you cannot make others understand your thoughts, it could be argued that you don't have thoughts.
26. Try: effort is critical. Michael Jordan didn't learn to shoot baskets by having somebody tell him how to do it.
27. Play: Make your learning, whatever it is you are learning, an emotional experience.
28. Risk: You've heard that you can learn from your mistakes, so take the opportunity to make some!

HOW TO THINK ABOUT AND GET THE MOST OUT OF CLASS TIME

1. This is not a lecture course! It involves active work, not passive listening.
2. I've structured the assignments to encourage you to come to class most of the time. But come to class all the time! It's not just that I want a full house. Honest. The research shows that students who come to class tend to do better—not just because they're there, but because they have more of a chance to work (play).
3. Come early to class. Usually I and several students are around and it's a perfect time to ask questions, talk about the material, chill out, wake up for class, and relax.
4. At the very least, don't come late to class.
5. Get to know other students in the class. You can study together, exchange notes, and/or share study guides.
6. Sit up front! That way, sometimes you can ask questions without raising your hand. It also is less intimidating to participate when you can't see the other 90% of the students.
7. Be active during class. Do NOT come to class just to sit and listen.
8. Take notes either during or after class to solidify your learning. Finish tasks that you didn't complete in class. Write down your own associations to the material to help you remember.
9. Think during class, even when you are not active in other ways. Think about the connections between examples and the definitions, between what you're learning in this course and (a) what you learned previously, (b) what you're learning in other courses, and (c) your life.
10. Listen to your fellow students! Sometimes their contributions or questions can show up on the test! Also, their examples are often really good.
11. If you miss class you can (a) ask your classmates what you missed, (b) post a question to the Discussion Board, and/or (c) find a short summary on Blackboard ("What You Missed"). What you can't do is get notes from me or the TA.
12. Come to my office hours. Ask questions about the material, or just share with me an example that you came up with.
13. Make sure to read the assigned modules BEFORE class. Come with questions and ideas. If for any reason you get behind, do not try to cram! Make a schedule (even more carefully than usual) and catch up some each day.
14. Buy a study guide, and use it.

HOW TO READ THE TEXT (OR ANY TEXT!)

I know you know how to read. But how often do you actively *read for understanding*? Reading doesn't mean scanning the pages across your retina! It means actively engaging with the material in order to get the most from it. Reading a chapter is like going out on a date. You don't just want to know what the date is saying, but you want to really understand your date.

To take this date analogy one (and only one) step further: You need to prepare for your date (you know, shower and dress), you need to behave well on the date, and you need to follow-up on the date (with a phone call, with flowers, with an apology, whatever…). Likewise, there are things to do before, during, and after you read a module in the book. I've separated these out into three separate lists of techniques, but as you read and try them, remember that lots of them can be done at various times.

One helpful technique is to have a list of "sentence starters" that you can complete at any time—as you preview, as you read, or as you review. Here is a list of some sentence starters—to get you started:

- I already know that _____
- This reminds me of _____
- This relates to _____
- I can remember this _____
- This is different from _____ because _____
- What if _____
- I wonder _____
- I would imagine that _____
- If this were a movie, _____
- I can relate to this because _____
- I'm not sure about _____
- I need more clarity _____
- I'm guessing about this _____
- I need to _____

Before Reading

1. Skim. Look over what you're going to read. Catch section headings, bold-face terms, pictures, graphs, and other clues about what you're in for.
2. Read the summary.
3. Formulate questions (based on your skimming) about what you're about to read. You can try to answer the review questions based on what you already know.
4. Write out your answers to the Learning Objectives in the book *before* you read the chapter. You will be making stuff up, to be sure. But it's better to guess before reading than to guess on the exam!
5. Recite lists of terms. Keep in mind that psychology, like other fields, has lots of technical terms, some of which have everyday definitions which are VERY different. For example, in daily life, "personality" means something that you have and your roommate doesn't. But in psychology, "personality" has very different and very specific meanings. The same is true for terms such as "experiment," "control," "depression," "attachment," "stress," and "attitudes."

During Your Reading

1. Put charts and graphs into words.
2. Read out loud.
3. Copy material you've read or heard.
4. Take notes verbatim.
5. Underline important parts of the text as you read.
6. Use imagery. *Put words into pictures, and pictures into words.* When the book or instructor describes a concept, picture what that would look (or sound, or feel) like. For example, what would a therapist actually say to a client that would demonstrate unconditional positive regard? Likewise, when you are presented with a graph or a table showing research results, put that picture into words. Ask yourself, "What have I learned from this research, and how does it relate to what I already know?"
7. Use mnemonics. This means memory devices. For example, use acronyms, like "HOMES" for the great lakes or "Roy G. Biv" for the colors in the spectrum. Make up stories for long lists. Write limericks or something that rhymes. Some people set definitions or concepts to a familiar song and sing it to themselves.
8. Method of loci. This is a mnemonic where you associate material you're learning with places (loci)—places in your house, houses on your street, places you know well. Then, to remember the information, you can imagine the places.
9. Create analogies and examples. Use your associative thinking. While studying, relate the concepts and information to other material that you know well. For example, many research findings about aging can be understood if you have a picture of a person going through life—having children, losing their hearing, facing death, retaining their crystallized intelligence, etc. The more associations you make to a given fact or concept, the more likely you are to remember it. Funny or ridiculous associations, associations to TV shows or music, and associations to familiar people or events are very good. Comical or absurd imagery and examples seem to work well.
10. Tell stories using the material. Narratives are easy to remember.
11. Cluster information. Form key terms into groups of related items.
12. Get the main ideas. You can do this by outlining material and/or diagramming it to make it more visual.
13. Keep a "reading journal" where you write your thoughts about what you are reading—what you're learning, what it means to you, what you need clarity on.

After Reading

1. Paraphrase what you've read or heard.
2. Summarize what you've read or heard.
3. Formulate questions about what you're not clear on.
4. Answer questions. Find review questions at the end of modules, on the book's web site, and in the study guide. Answer the questions and review why you got them right or wrong.
5. Formulate one or two new examples for each of the concepts.
6. Continue with or redo the sentence starters you did before.
7. Make up some test questions (multiple-choice and short-answer) that would be a little challenging for someone who didn't read as carefully as you.
8. Review and rewrite the answers to the Learning Objectives.
9. Make-up flash cards. One set of cards could have a key term on one side and a definition

on the other. Another set could have the key term on one side and an example on the other. Then, you can test yourself by term, by definition, or by example. All those ways will be on the tests!

10. Re-read. Re-read everything at least a few times. And read differently each time. One time highlight, one time stop and think of examples as you read, one time take notes, one time paraphrase each paragraph (with the book closed) after you read it.

HOW TO STUDY REALLY, REALLY WELL

1. Set goals for your studying. Set goals for each term, each week, each day, etc.
2. Schedules. Prioritize your time! You have lots of other demands on your time, but there is too much information covered on the exams to learn it all in just the day or two before the exam. Find out soon when your midterms are, when papers are due in other classes, when your Aunt Bertha is coming to visit, etc. Then, create a schedule to minimize your stress during these "peak" times.
3. Study Space. Try to have a defined, quiet, and organized area. Find a quiet place to study with adequate lighting and no distractions. Turn off the music, the TV, the wife/husband, girlfriend/boyfriend, significant other, etc., in order to be able to focus all your attention to the task at hand (studying).
4. Focus Your Attention. Take frequent (but short) breaks to keep yourself fresh. But even during breaks, let yourself think about the material.
5. Test-taking awareness. Always think about what might be on the test. In fact, try to make up test questions (multiple choice and short answer) as you go. Ask yourself questions such as: "What is good to remember from this paragraph?" "Why was this graph important enough to stick in the book?" "What does this information relate to from previous modules, or from other courses?"
6. Self-test. Use the study guide to test your knowledge and find out what you need to know. Then, re-study the material that's giving you the most problems.
7. Attributions to effort. When you don't do well on a test, what reasons are you quick to consider? Research suggests that students improve more when they attribute their performance to low effort and lack of course knowledge, rather than to a lack of interest, a test that was too hard, mean instructors, and other such things. The reason? You have control over the effort you produce—both the amount and quality of effort.
8. Mood. Give yourself a pep talk! Instead of saying things to yourself like, "This stuff sucks. I'm not smart enough. I'll never be good at this," try saying things like, "I can learn anything if I put in some time," or "It's hard, but I can do this."
9. Enthusiasm. Find ways to get enthusiastic about what you're doing. You can even start by making believe this is the most interesting and useful stuff you've ever seen!
10. Persistence. Keep at it. Try these strategies even when you don't yet know if they're working.
11. Self-reinforcement. Reward yourself for sticking to a schedule, for finishing a module, for staying awake, for small sub-goals.
12. Study with other people. Form a study group and meet regularly. Space out the study sessions (don't just get together the day before the test). Quiz each other. Tell each other stories. Challenge each other to remember.
13. ASK QUESTIONS! First of yourself, but also of classmates, of the TA, of me. Ask questions in class, via e-mail, or on the discussion board in Blackboard.

HOW TO TAKE TESTS

In this section, I review some basics of test-taking. In the following sections I have more specific advice for multiple-choice and short-answer questions.

Before

1. Read the book more than a couple of days before the test (continuously read a little every day).
2. Sleep well the night before the exam and make sure you eat a good breakfast that morning. This will make you more alert and better able to concentrate.
3. Have all your materials prepared well in advance: pencils, Scantron forms, etc. Remember, not having your Scantron form costs you three points!
4. Read the "Reminders for the Tests" in the Course Documents folder of Blackboard.
5. Show up early or at least on time. You will not feel rushed or worried that you've disturbed other students.

During

1. Relax at the beginning of, and throughout, the test. You expend too much energy by being overly tense during a test. That energy should be spent thinking about the material rather than ruminating about how much you could have studied, or how dumb you are, or how dumb the instructor is, etc. A good start would be just to take some deep breaths.
2. Be optimistic! Assume you have information that will help you answer the questions.
3. Use coping self-statements. Tell yourself positive things such as, "I know enough material to do well on this test," "One test does not determine my entire future," or, "I am relaxed and will do the best I can on this test."
4. Use your pencil to point at each word when you are reading the question. Many students miss questions because they simply do not see (or forget) an important word such as "never," "always," "less," "more," "except," etc.
5. Answer questions ACTIVELY. Before asking yourself, "What's the right answer?" ask yourself, "What do I know that might be relevant to this question? What images or stories does this question remind me of?"
6. Trust your knowledge. Answer questions based on the assumption that you know the material, rather than on the assumption that you don't. This will help your associative thinking, keep your attitude positive, and help you eliminate distracters that are made up. If a choice does not look familiar, it probably isn't correct.
7. Use the pictures and stories you've created to help you remember.
8. If you don't understand a question, feel free to raise your hand and we'll try to help. Although we can't define course terms, we can help you with general vocabulary.
9. Answer something for every question. Here's what one student said regarding the short answer questions: "Some students did not write any answers for the short answer questions. Mitch was very generous when grading the short answer questions, so if you wrote something you got credit. Make sure never to leave anything blank."

After

1. Come to the next class to pick up your tests, and take the time to go over your answers.

2. If you didn't do as well as you thought, DON'T WAIT! Don't assume that a bad grade is a fluke. Come see me, and start studying more effectively right away.
3. From another student: "There was an improvement in students who didn't do as well as they liked on the first exam who went to Mitch for advice. Mitch has office hours and can really help to explain if there is a problem with the way you are studying!"
4. Get your money's worth by getting help from me, and/or from the Learning Resources Center (under External Links).

HOW TO READ AND ANSWER MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Cover the answers when you read the question. Many students try to save time by looking at the answers while they're reading the question. Then they lock onto the first answer that looks right. But if they haven't read the rest of the question, the answer they choose is often wrong. To prevent this, read the entire question first, without looking at the answers. Try to answer it as if it were a short-answer question. Many students have told me, "I can't answer multiple-choice questions; I'd rather have short answer questions." By covering the answers, you can answer these questions just like they were short answer questions!
2. Put the question into your own words and images. Without looking at the answers, make the question more familiar by putting it into your own words. Then, try to figure out what the question is about. If provided with an example, picture the example described, and try to notice similarities between the example and the pictures you already have in your head. (Notice that this is an active process, not just recognizing familiar words.)
3. Read all the answers before eliminating or choosing any of them. Don't jump to conclusions! Many students pick the first item that looks right, not realizing that distracters are designed to do just that: to distract you with concepts or labels that are similar but not correct.
4. Eliminate answers that are incorrect, and cross them out. In the rush to finish, some students choose an answer that they had already eliminated.
5. When you're down to two possible answers, VERBALIZE the reasons why each one might be correct. Then choose the answer with the best verbal justifications. Don't just wait for divine inspiration. You studied by making associations, so answer the question the same way.
6. "Double-check" your choice. You can do this in several ways. For example, try to remember another example that makes a connection between the stem and the correct answer. Another check: Ask yourself, "What would the question look like if the other answers were correct?"
7. Leave difficult items for later. Give some thought to each item, but if you are not having success at eliminating distracters, skip the item and leave it for later. This way, you can think about the harder questions knowing that you have already answered a bunch of questions correctly.

Example:

In an experimental study of the effects of sleep deprivation on memory, memory would be the:

a. control condition
b. independent variable
c. experimental condition
d. dependent variable

If your knowledge is not perfect, this could be a difficult question, but you can bring lots of information to bear. First, try to answer as if it were a short answer question. If that doesn't work, ask yourself, "What do I know about variables and conditions?" Draw a picture: What would this study look like? You would go into the lab and the experimenter would randomly assign you either to be sleep deprived or not. Then he or she would test your memory. You know that the independent variable is the one the experimenter manipulates, and in your picture the experimenter is manipulating sleep deprivation. So you tentatively eliminate answer b. If you know that the dependent variable is the one the experimenter measures, you can picture the experimenter measuring how much you remember, and so memory would be the dependent variable. You tentatively choose answer d. As a final check, you remember that conditions have to do with the independent variable: The control condition is what usually happens (no sleep deprivation) and the experimental condition is the "test" condition (sleep deprivation). The condition is the group that people are assigned to, and memory isn't a group or condition, it is a variable. Now you feel confident choosing d.

HOW TO READ AND ANSWER SHORT-ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. Read the question. Every word. Notice words like "define," "list," "speculate," etc. They are there for a reason. If the question asks for two examples, provide two.
2. Answer the question. Don't just do a "data dump" of everything you know.
3. Use what you've learned. It's a good practice always to use at least one key term or concept when answering the question.
4. Remember that the question is asking for your learning, not your opinion. In psychology courses, many questions seem like they may be asking about your experience. "What does personality mean?" is a question that can be answered by anybody, based on their life experience. But when it's on a psychology exam, the question is clearly asking: "What is the psychological definition of personality?" or "How did we define personality in class or in the text?"

Example:

Here's a typical question. "From the trait approach to personality, why might Barack Obama have wanted to become president?" Here's one possible answer you could write:

> Barack Obama wanted to become president because he felt he could do a good job, and he wanted to change things for the better.

This is not a good answer. There may be some information about the trait approach hidden in this answer, but it's not stated. This answer doesn't demonstrate that you have done the reading, let alone understand it. It seems more like an opinion. Here's a better answer:

> Barack Obama wanted to become president because of enduring personality characteristics, or traits. [This is basic. It could be true of anybody's motivations to do anything, but it already earns more points than the first answer because it shows that you know at least something about the trait perspective. To earn more points, you continue and do some speculating:] Without having President Obama take a *personality inventory* (such as the *MMPI*) we can only speculate. But

Eysenck might predict that Obama was way on the *extraverted* and *stable* poles of the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire,* meaning that he might want a job with a high level of interaction with others, and in a leadership position. His extraversion and stability may also have been why he chose to be a community organizer and professor rather than a lawyer who sat behind a desk all day. But even more, Obama might have had just the right amount of the *big five personality factors* in the right combination. For example, he might be very high on *conscientiousness*, *extraversion,* and *openness*, while being low on *neuroticism*. How did he acquire these traits? Some of it might have been from his strong mother and her training of him; about half might have *inherited*.

Notice much information—including key terms—from the textbook you use (the italicized words). You don't define the key terms, but your accurate use of them shows that you understand what they mean. Also, you use words such as "may" and "might" to show that you are speculating. You also demonstrate that you know that motivations are complex. This is an A answer because of all these things. Finally, you earn the final possible point by using some specific information about Barack's history in your speculation.

REFERENCES

The two books listed here are major sources of information for this document. On the External Links section of Blackboard, you will find other very helpful information.

McKeachie, W. J., Pintrich, P. R., Lin, Y., & Smith, D. A. F. (1986). *Teaching and learning in the college classroom: A review of the research literature.* Ann Arbor, MI: National Center for Research to Improve Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, University of Michigan.

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