

HOW TO USE SMART STUDY SKILLS TO GET BETTER GRADES

WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

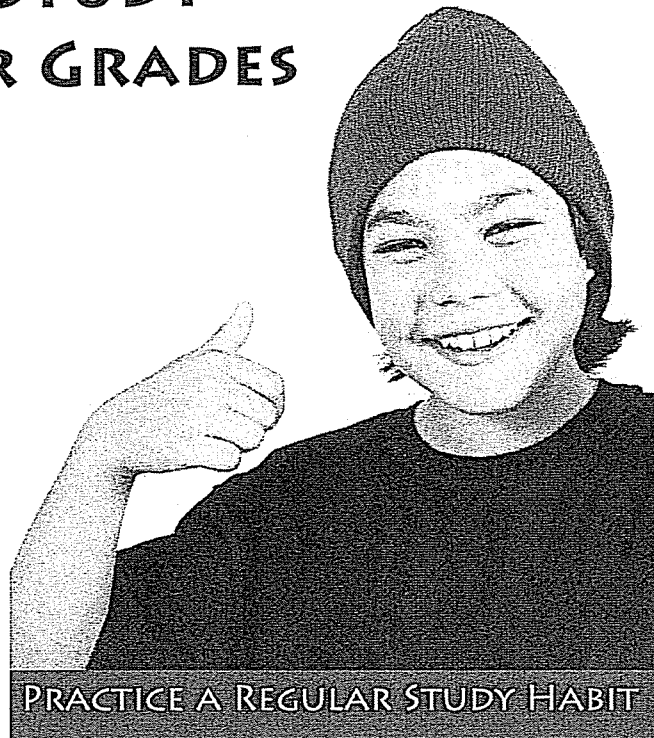
No matter how hard we work, it seems like there is never enough time or energy to get all the important work tasks done. Rather than working longer and longer hours, consider working more strategically—smarter, not harder. Often finding a place of less effort can be more productive than trying harder, and harder, and harder until exhaustion sets in.

DON'T MAKE WORK HARDER THAN IT ACTUALLY IS

Much pressure is self-induced. We set unrealistically high goals or standards for ourselves and feel like we should be doing more. If we set the bar too high, we may get too discouraged too easily and give up. Trying too hard to be perfect usually gets in the way. Most times we can even seek out help in understanding the assignment. We can also keep perspective by focussing on just one step at a time, rather than trying to tackle the whole project at once.

TUNE INTO HOW YOUR BRAIN REACTS TO MISTAKES

Henry Ford, the guy who designed the famous Model T car and invented the assembly line for automobile manufacturing, once said, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right." One big difference between people who think they can get better grades and those who think they can't is how they respond to mistakes. Guys who say, "When I make a mistake I figure it out" or "When the going gets tough, I hang in there with more effort" find a way to become successful. Recognize that we can't learn without making mistakes, and that mistakes are part of a long learning process.



PRACTICE A REGULAR STUDY HABIT

Building and breaking a habit takes approximately three weeks. After those 21 or so days of sticking to a new plan, we start to find the new routine more natural, and results begin to appear. After three weeks of sticking with a regular study habit, you'll find you don't have to think about it so much, and you'll have more time for fun stuff.

NOTICE WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF YOUR LEARNING

As long as you are doing your bit to stay on track, you can pay attention to what makes it difficult for you to focus in class. Are you bored or maybe over-stimulated? Are you sitting next to a loud person? Is it hard to hear, or to see the board? Do you feel sleepy when you sit too long? Are you feeling pressured by inner or outer demands? Is someone stressing you out, or even bullying you?

If you recognize a problem that may be interfering with your learning, talk with your teacher or parent and invite them to help you brainstorm possible solutions.

STAY HYDRATED

Are you drinking enough water? We know from brain science that the brain needs lots of water to function at its optimum. Have a water bottle at your desk and take a sip every 15 minutes or so.

USE SMART FUEL

Everyone loves junk food, especially boys, but is it a smart fuel? Eating healthy food gives your body and brain the fuel it needs. Eat breakfast and avoid too much sugar, especially in the morning. Consider whether you need slower-burning protein foods rather than the fast-burning carbohydrates and sugars commonly found in pre-packaged snacks.

RECHARGE WITH HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS

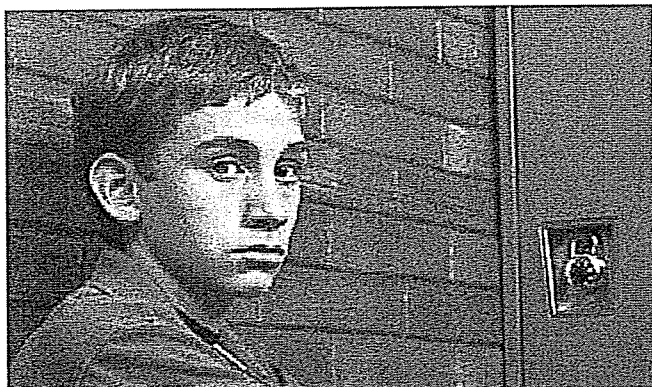
Did you know that while you are sleeping you are recharging your batteries and growing? Get a good night's sleep and you'll be surprised by how much smarter you are in the morning. You might already know this, but avoiding pop and screen time before bedtime makes for better sleep. Scientists have learned that texting or using any screen in the middle of the night can stress a brain out. Turn your personal devices off and leave them in another room where you won't be tempted to check for texts in the middle of the night.

GET MOVING

Did you know that Canadian boys are three times more likely to be obese than girls? Walking, longboarding, or riding a bike will not only keep you fit, but will also increase your memory and study stamina, and help you to feel more confident. Aim for 30 to 60 minutes of vigorous activity every day.

CLEAR THE CLUTTER

Are you the super-organized kind of guy who is picky about putting stuff away, or do you find it practically impossible to find stuff when you need it? If you are a bit disorganized, start fresh by organizing your desk or your workspace. Are you a bit of a pack rat? Some guys will dream up the strangest excuse to keep everything. Don't. As you clear the clutter in your desk, throw away anything you haven't used in a month, and you can't foresee needing for another month.



FIND A PLACE FOR IMPORTANT STUFF

You will have less stress when you are able to find stuff when you need it. Use shoeboxes or baskets or file folders to store your important stuff and group things together in a way that makes sense to you. Find a system that works for you—labels or colour coding—for notes, supplies, and assignments. After you use something, put it back as soon as you are done with it.

KEEP YOUR BACKPACK TIDY

Every couple of days—maybe daily for some guys—completely empty your backpack and/or locker and tidy it up. You may be amazed at what you uncover—sometimes that missing homework shows up just in time. If there are old assignments and quizzes that you might want to use later for review, file them away in a special folder. Clean out handouts or assignments you are sure you won't need again, and send them to the trash.

FIND A PLACE AND SCHEDULE THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Find a place to study that is free of clutter and distraction—including the distraction of the television. If you set aside a specific time to do your home study every day at the same time, you will be more productive. Whether that time is right after school or after supper, setting a schedule and keeping to it will help to keep you focussed.

SWITCH UP THE ROUTINE ONCE IN A WHILE

If you are feeling antsy or uninspired in your study time, stir things up a little: work outside, move to another room, or even consider working at the public library. Sometimes completely new surroundings will help you work better and faster.

USE A PLANNER

Ask any successful adult about how they organize their life and they will probably tell you that they use a planner. What are the most important things that you need to do in the next while? Write down your test and assignment due dates. You can then plan how much to do after school each day, and how much time to spend on each topic. If you have a cell phone, use the calendar to remind you when important tasks are due.

SET GOALS

As a part of your study plan, set realistic and measurable goals. Rather than taking on a large goal such as completing a major essay for English, you might break this goal down into sub-goals such as finding a topic, jotting down notes, writing a draft, and revising a draft. Goals should state which tasks are to be completed and approximately when. Rather than setting firm deadlines, which can lead to pressure and stress, allow a realistic time frame to reach goals.

MANAGE YOUR TIME

If you notice that you are getting stalled on one thing for too long, it's time to step back. If you are on the web gathering research, time can disappear, be mindful of how fast time can disappear as you surf the web. If you get stuck on one particular piece of schoolwork, leave it and move on to the next piece; otherwise frustration will rise and make matters worse. Go back to it after a while and things might be clearer or talk with your teacher, parent, or a friend to find out more.

CHUNK THOSE TASKS

Do you ever put off big tasks like a book report or reading a novel until it's too late, and then wonder why you did that? Most people take one look at the task and a cloud of worry or boredom tells them that it's too big to tackle. When there's a lot to study, it definitely helps to break things into smaller chunks. Write down the steps you need to take to accomplish a task, and then do one step at a time. If you are doing a book report, don't try to do it all at once. Even breaking the book report down into three or four elements can help: maybe writing about the plot, then later your ideas on what you liked and what you didn't like.

TAKE FREQUENT BREAKS

Study more often for shorter periods. Instead of trying to do everything all at once in a marathon study session, set a timer for 15 minutes, or whatever feels right for you. Even 10 minutes of work is better than nothing. Stand up and get your body moving and you will recharge your brain cells and be more focussed when you get back to work.

MOTIVATE YOURSELF

Discover what motivates you and use it to reward yourself when you reach goals, both big and small ones. When you reach a big goal, treat yourself to a movie or buy that new video game you've been saving for. Smart studying also means finding motivation for the smaller goals, treating yourself in a small way after you read a page or a chapter in a textbook. These tiny rewards could be as simple as having a Smartie—or a mandarin orange—or allowing yourself a flash game such as *Angry Birds*. They could also be exercise breaks—shooting a few hoops in the driveway, or racing your dog outside.



FIND A TUTOR OR A MENTOR

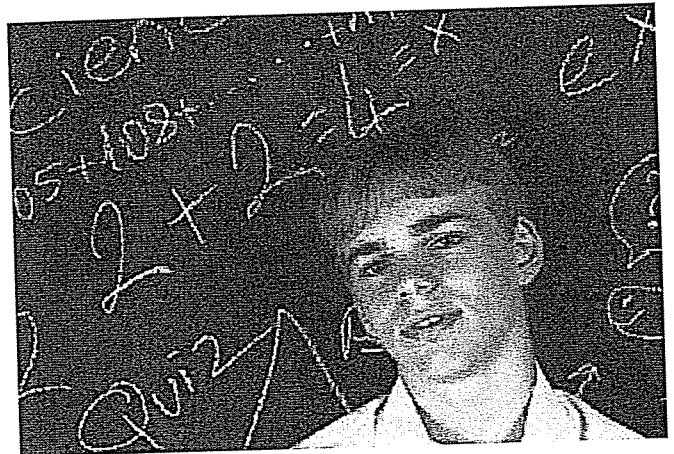
If you find that you are still struggling with study time, talk to a trusted adult. Asking for help is a sign that you are confident and taking charge. Remember too that your school will likely have study help available for you during lunch or after school.

TRAIN YOUR MIND TO BE POSITIVE

At the end of every day, identify three things that went well. This habit trains your mind to find the positive in everyday life. Remember that you are the boss of your happiness. Rick Hanson, the "Man in Motion" guy who didn't let living in a wheelchair get him down, says our brains are like Velcro for negative experiences and like Teflon for positive experiences. If we don't pay attention, our minds will focus on the negative and wash away the positive. If we don't accentuate the positive we can burn out. If every day you can identify what's going well and how your actions resulted in those going-well moments, you might have a very different kind of school year than you've had before. You might also find that other people like being around more positive energy.

FIND YOUR OWN STUDY STYLE

Don't try and apply all of these ideas at once, but work on a few that draw you the most. Pay attention to the things that seem to work the best for you. What seems to be your study style? Are you more alert and focussed earlier in the day, or in the evening? Some people like to study with other people to prepare for a test; others prefer to study alone. Some guys like to write down



things to remember them; others might have to read things out loud; and many people learn best when they are actively moving or building something. The best ideas may come when we are engaged in what has been called a *flow* state—when we are fully absorbed in the moment. Take time to discover your own smart way to study successfully.

As parents, mentors, and teachers, we can also help our boys at times less by what we say than by what we embody in our own lives.

When we are most stressed, that is the time to remember that we too need to take breaks, set small, attainable goals, and find the positive.

And give ourselves small rewards. A *Smartie* can sometimes be enough. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

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Postscript...

Perhaps you have a story or suggestion from home or school about encouraging a boy to learn smart study skills?

Please email info@mentoringboys.com