

How To Be A Good Student

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Introduction

There's a prevailing assumption that university study entitles graduates to qualifications that yield higher salaries, a prosperous career, and greater life satisfaction. The person needn't do anything more than obtain a degree. This false belief trickles down to the student who enrolls at university. Students see the time they spend at university as a means-to-a-profitable-end, rather than as an end-in-itself. While students should consider a fulfilling vocation an end-goal, it shouldn't consume them.

Students who tend to focus on life after university, rather than attending to the means they're going to have to undertake to reach that end, usually perform poorly at university. Here are some rules of thumb to follow to be a good student. Following them, and only them, won't likely lead to better marks but they're a start.

1 Attend lectures and tutorials regularly

It seems cliché, but attending lectures, tutorials, and related seminars do improve one's ability to learn material presented in lecture. And when I say attend lectures, I mean that you're going to lecture as a participant in the learning process. In other words, don't just go and sit quietly. Engage with others who attend the lecture. If you and them share anything, it is at least some curiosity about the topics central to the class. Of course, you shouldn't forget that the lecturer is just as intellectually curious about the subject matter, too. Attend and interact with the lecturer, students, and visitors.

2 Take notes... a lot of them

When I was a student, I attended many lectures, tutorials, and special events, like colloquia, workshops, and seminars, even if they were outside my major area of study. When I attended these events, I took my notebook and a writing

instrument. If someone raised an important question, challenge, criticism, or an interesting point, I would write it down. If the lecturer summarised a position in class, I would write it in my notebook. Besides that, I would jot down not only what the instructor or tutor, or other students, said but I would also provide myself with memos to return to a text that might clarify what the instructor or tutor was saying. Class content likely depends on what was in the reading, so taking notes functions as a guidebook for learning the material appearing in the required or recommended text.

Taking notes isn't restricted to the classroom. One should actively engage with the class' reading assignments outside the classroom by outlining the main argument of the text, as well as the auxiliary arguments that serve to support it, before the lecturer explains it during lecture. Take notes when you're reading a text. In fact, it might even be a good idea to take notes in the margins of the text itself. Doing so provides you with a means of returning to the text later in order to better comprehend the material presented in the text. More information about reading a philosophy text is provided elsewhere on this website, so check it out, too.

3 Readings are Important!

The lecturer has likely assigned a reading assignment for students to review prior to the lecture in which it is introduced. Read it... and then read it again. The material contained in the reading is probably unfamiliar enough (or difficult enough) that many readings are warranted.

People approach readings differently, and it really matters how one digests complicated material. For me, I scan the chapter or journal article, note section and subsection headings in order to try to glean the main points or even the main arc of the argument appearing in the reading. Then, I read the piece from start-to-finish, taking notes along the way, writing in the margins (marginalia), and underlining text in pencil. Usually, I put the article or chapter down for a few hours (or days – whichever is possible under the circumstances). When I return to the reading afresh, I review my notes and do a thorough reading of specific important sections. During the thorough reading, I rehearse how I would explain to others what the author argues.

4 Review notes regularly

It's not enough to take notes in lecture or while reading; review them. In fact, review them often. A good rule of thumb is for students to review the previous week's / lecture's notes just before the lecture that follows, and to review the lecture notes just following the lecture in which they were taken. If something doesn't look quite right to the student, then approach the lecturer with questions to clarify the notes you had taken in lecture. There's no use for taking notes if the student doesn't regularly return to them.

5 Begin assignments as soon as you receive them

While assignments in philosophy can be daunting, they tend to be more surmountable if you begin them early. I distribute assignments at least two weeks prior to the deadline. When you receive the assignment, review it immediately. Then, return to it at a time outside of class time to ensure that you understand the assignment.

6 Attend the instructor's office hours

Instructors should have an open office hour or two for students to visit with questions they have about the course requirements and content. Students should take the opportunity to use the instructor as resource. At least one former colleague of mine, required students to attend office hours with a set objective, e.g., a series of questions about a text, a course requirement, etc. Trouble is that that's just not how philosophy works. Philosophy is a conversation, so the best office hours are the ones that the student and instructor engage in dialogue about a particularly troubling passage or problematic premise in an argument for a particular conclusion. Don't feel as if one must show up with an agenda; show up with a few questions or comments and see where the conversation leads.