How to Become a Straight-A Student

The Unconventional Strategies Real College Students Use to Score High While Studying Less

Cal Newport

Author of HOW TO WIN AT COLLEGE

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Introduction

"My friends always wondered why I was never in the library, but instead in the student center socializing, or at a party, or at an event. They said I made it 'all look so easy.'"

***Anna,** a straight-A college student*

This is not your average college study guide. Unlike the titles next to it on the shelf, none of the advice presented here was devised by professors or self-proclaimed academic skills experts. I promise that you won't find any mention of the Cornell note-taking method, mental map diagrams, or any other "optimal learning technique" crafted in an office or laboratory—environments far removed from the realities of typical college life.

Instead, this book reveals—for the first time—the study habits used by real straight-A college students. All of the advice that follows was distilled from a series of interviews I conducted with a large group of top-scoring undergraduates. These participants were drawn predominantly from the Phi Beta Kappa rolls of some of the country's most rigorous colleges and universities—including Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, Brown, Columbia, Duke, Amherst, and Skidmore—and they were carefully chosen to represent a wide variety of academic concentrations. In each interview, I asked the student to detail his or her study habits. The questions ranged from the general ("How do you defeat the urge to procrastinate?") to the specific ("What techniques or systems do you use to locate and organize sources for a research paper?"). If the questionnaire revealed the student to be a grind—someone who earns high grades simply by

studying an excessive amount—I discarded the responses. I was interested only in students who improved their grades through smarter, more efficient study skills—not through longer hours and more painful study sessions.

How did I know such students existed? *I am one of them.* When I arrived as a freshman at Dartmouth College, I had no idea how to prepare for exams or write college-level papers. Like most students, I left high school believing that to study meant to reread your class notes and assignments as many times as possible and that paper writing required you to sit down in front of your computer and start typing until you finished. The problem, however, is that college is not high school. The material to be mastered is much more complicated and the professors have higher expectations. In the college environment, simple brute force study methods can end up requiring a lot of time and causing a lot of pain. Nevertheless, most students still rely on them. And this is why they find themselves regularly pulling all-nighters and developing an antagonistic attitude toward their courses. The taxing effects and spotty success of these methods also underlie the common belief that only geniuses and grinds can score top grades.

When I first entered college, I shared in these beliefs. But soon I became dubious. It didn't take long for me to decide that there had to be a better way to learn the material. The results of my studying using simple techniques varied widely—I'd spend all night hacking away at an essay and end up scoring a B-, or give what I thought was a frantic last-minute review for a quiz and score an A. I constantly felt like I was behind in my reading, and there always seemed to be new deadlines on the horizon that I had to scramble to meet. It was truly a chaotic existence. But when I looked around, all of my friends seemed to be having the same experience—and none of them seemed willing to question it. This didn't sit right with me. I wasn't content to work in long, painful stretches and then earn only slightly above-average grades for my efforts. I wanted to be exceptional. And I wanted to achieve this without having to sacrifice sleep or my social life. To many students, such a goal may sound hopelessly hubristic. But I'm an optimist by nature, and, observing the sorry state of my current study skills, I was convinced that I could do better.

It took me most of my freshman year to construct, through repeated experimentation, a toolbox of sufficiently improved study habits. But once I had perfected them, the results were profound. Of the thirty-six courses I took between my sophomore and senior years of college, I scored exactly one A- and 26 perfect As. The most stunning piece of this transformation, however, was how much less time I had to spend on studying. As my strategies became more refined, the hours required were reduced. By my senior year it got to the point where, during finals periods, I would sometimes *pretend* to be heading off to the library just so I wouldn't demoralize my roommates, who were preparing for yet another grim all-nighter.

What was my secret? *Efficiency.* The simple truth is that the brute force techniques used by most students are incredibly inefficient. When it comes to exam preparation, passive review is not an effective way to learn complicated concepts. It's also mentally draining, which further diminishes the rate at which you can absorb and internalize information. For paper writing, this same problem holds. When you approach the task without proper preparation, it becomes incredibly tiring and you can end up spinning your wheels. After a

while, even the formation of coherent sentences becomes difficult and time intensive. In contrast, the techniques I came up with were so streamlined that I could learn more material than my classmates and actually spend less time studying. By eliminating stupid habits and wasted effort, I transformed exam prep and paper writing from a dreaded chore to a targeted activity.

For a while, I was convinced that I was unique for having discovered such a smart approach to learning. But, alas, this illusion was soon shattered. It occurred during the winter of my senior year, when I was attending a ceremony celebrating my induction, along with thirty other classmates, into Phi Beta Kappa. This group represented, more or less, the thirty students with the highest G.P.A.s out of my class of over a thousand. Accordingly, I had arrived at the venue prepared to spend the evening with some serious nerds. As it turns out, however, I was in for a surprise.

Upon walking through the door that night, I was immediately struck by how many of the other students I knew socially. These were people who, given their level of visibility on campus, I never would have imagined were scoring straight As. They were magazine editors, frat boys, and crunchy environmentalists. I knew them from parties and campus clubs and through mutual friends. They were, for the most part, normal, well-rounded, and interesting—not at all the type of super-grind one might assume would occupy such an elite level of academic achievement. The lesson of that night was obvious: Perhaps I was not, in fact, as unique as I had first imagined. Maybe there were others out there who had discovered similar secrets to academic success.

The writer instincts in me soon took over. Fascinated to know exactly how these seemingly normal students had done so well, I sent

all of my fellow Phi Beta Kappas a survey about their study habits. Most were happy to share their methods and I quickly confirmed that my suspicions were true. Not only were many of them using innovative, homegrown study strategies, but many of these strategies were surprisingly similar to those that I had developed during the previous few years.

At the time I had just finished editing the manuscript for my first book, *How to Win at College*, so I wasn't exactly eager to get started right away with another massive writing project. But after seeing these initial survey responses, I knew I had stumbled onto something big. While most college students toil arduously through the study and paper-writing processes, there exists an elite group of undergrads who have discovered unconventional strategies for earning much higher grades in much less time. I wanted to share these secrets with other students, and thus the idea for this book was born. Soon I was sending out more questionnaires to more straight-A students at colleges around the country, until I gathered enough responses, from students with enough different backgrounds and majors, to distill the advice presented in this guide.

In the pages that follow, you will discover the details of these often surprising study strategies. I've included examples and case studies throughout the book to demonstrate how to apply the advice in many different real-life academic situations. You will learn how to:

- Manage your time and deal with the urge to procrastinate.
- Take targeted notes in class.
- Handle reading assignments and problem sets with ease.
- Prepare efficiently for exams.

- Master the art of exam-taking.
- Write incisive critical analysis essays.
- Conduct thorough research.
- Write standout term papers.

Remember, this advice comes from real students and was honed, through trial and error, in real college classrooms. This distinction is important. It's what separates this book from the many existing study guides that sit next to it on the bookstore shelf. As mentioned, most study guides are written either by professors or academic skills experts, many years separated from their own college experience. The result is that the authors of these guides are disconnected from the realities of undergraduate life.

For example, *How to Study*, by college professors Allan Mundsack, James Deese, and Ellin K. Deese, suggests that students wake up at 7 A.M. each morning, go to sleep by 11 P.M. each night, and on many days schedule only a single hour of "recreation," with the rest of the time dedicated to attending class, eating, or working. One gets the feeling that these professors haven't spent much time socializing with students lately. Even their plan for Friday—the biggest party night of the week—has the student working until 10 P.M., taking a one-hour break, then turning in by eleven.

Student Success Secrets, written by Eric Jensen, a learning expert and professional public speaker, offers equally out-of-touch suggestions. His tips to help you remember concepts learned from a reading assignment include "put it in a picture or poster—use intense colors," "act out the material or do a fun role play in your own room," or "cre- or redo a song; *make a rap*." Just try to imagine a sophisticated liberal arts major attempting to make a rap about her recent reading assignment concerning post-structuralist interpretations of pre-Victorian English literature! (Key question: What word rhymes with "Foucault"?)

The granddaddy of all unrealistic study guides, however, just might be *What Smart Students Know*, by Princeton Review cofounder Adam Robinson. In this best-selling guide, Robinson suggests—and I swear I am not making this up—that students approach a reading assignment as a *twelve-step process!* That's right, twelve separate steps. Before you even crack the actual assignment, Robinson suggests that you jot down questions about the importance of the reading and then take notes on what you know about the topic, what it reminds you of, and what you want to learn. He then asks you, among other things, to read the assignment a total of three separate times, write and then rewrite your notes, represent the information in picture form, construct "question charts," and devise mnemonics to help you memorize the concepts. Needless to say, this approach to a simple reading assignment is humorously unrealistic. I even did a little math. For a typical college-level liberal arts course, a student might be assigned an average of two hundred pages of reading a week. In his book, Robinson provides a one-page sample reading and describes twenty-three different questions that students might ask about it. At this rate of twenty-three questions per page, spending thirty seconds on each query, we would end up spending around forty hours a week (i.e., a full-time job's worth of time) simply completing one of the twelve steps on the reading assignments for just one class. Sounds like a great plan!

These examples highlight the simple truth that the advice in most existing study guides—written by "experts," not students—is often

impractical and time consuming. *How to Become a Straight-A Student*, on the other hand, is the first guide based on the experiences of real college students, and it was written to provide an alternative to the other titles on the market. In the pages that follow, you will find homegrown strategies that are compatible with the demands of your day-to-day student life. They may not be as elaborate as the intricate systems devised by the "experts," but they're easy to implement—and they get the job done. Best of all, when you start putting these strategies into practice, you will experience immediate results.

Keep in mind: If you find a piece of advice that doesn't quite fit your needs or circumstances, that's okay. In fact, you should expect this. Each of the students I interviewed for this book had his or her own unique take on the best way to study. Follow their lead and, when stuck, experiment. Replace techniques you don't like with ones that seem better. If these new techniques work, keep them; if they fail, replace them with something else. The key to improving your grades without becoming a grind cannot be found in any single study habit. It is, instead, rooted in the big picture decision to reject rote review once and for all and begin the flexible search for strategies that work better for you.

Above all, remember that college is a multifaceted experience, of which grades are just one of many important pieces. It's my hope that this book will help you painlessly conquer this one piece so you can have more time and energy to explore all of the others—the friends, the unburdened idealism, the heroic beer consumption—that make these four years so rich.

Part 1
Study Basics

"Go big or go home. Seriously. Work hard when you work and you'll have plenty of time to play hard."

***Lydia**, a straight-A college student*

A common complaint I hear from students is that they never seem to have enough time to finish all of their work. They vent about how many hours they spend—late nights reviewing in the library, weekends sacrificed to paper writing—but no matter how hard they try, there always seems to be something else due. As Matthew, a straight-A student from Brown, explains, it's easy for college students to become "stuck in a state of permanent catch-up." Understandably, these students feel like they have reached their academic limit; they believe that unless they forgo sleep or any semblance of a social life, there are simply not enough hours in the day to stay on top of all their schoolwork.

Let's start by getting one thing clear: This belief is false. The problem here is not the amount of available hours, but rather how each hour is spent. I know this from firsthand experience. While researching this book, I spent time with some of the country's most accomplished students, and I can assure you that no matter how diligent you think you are, there is a Rhodes scholar out there who fits in three times the amount of work and activities you do and probably still manages to party harder than you would ever dare. I don't mean to imply that everyone should aim to become a drunken Rhodes scholar (though it would certainly be fun to try); rather, my point is that a

surprising amount of work, relaxation, and socializing can be extracted from a single twelve-hour day. A lack of time, therefore, isn't enough to explain why so many students feel overwhelmed. So what does explain this phenomenon? The answer, as it turns out, has much more to do with *how* we work than what we're trying to accomplish.

As humans, our minds have evolved to prefer short-term tasks such as "run away from that lion" or "eat food." Therefore, when you walk into the library on a Sunday morning with the goal of finishing all of your homework and writing a paper, your brain isn't happy. The idea of spending eight consecutive hours trapped in a study carrel is dispiriting. Plus, it's hard to focus for that long, so pretty soon fatigue will set in, your concentration will wander, and every distraction will suddenly seem impossibly appealing. Before you know it, the day will be over and you'll realize that you haven't accomplished much productive work at all. The next day, new assignments will pile onto those you didn't finish on Sunday, and the tedious process starts all over again.

Jason, a straight-A student from the University of Pennsylvania, uses the term "pseudo-working" to describe this common approach to studying. The pseudo-worker looks and feels like someone who is working hard—he or she spends a long time in the library and is not afraid to push on late into the night—but, because of a lack of focus and concentration, doesn't actually accomplish much. This bad habit is endemic on most college campuses. For example, at Dartmouth there was a section of the main library that was open twenty-four hours a day, and the students I used to see in there late at night huddled in groups, gulping coffee and griping about

their hardships, were definitely pseudo-working. The roommate who flips through her chemistry notes on the couch while watching TV is pseudo-working. The guy who brings three meals, a blanket, and six-pack of Red Bull to the study lounge in preparation for an all-day paper-writing marathon is also pseudo-working. By placing themselves in distracting environments and insisting on working in long tedious stretches, these students are crippling their brain's ability to think clearly and efficiently accomplish the task at hand. The result is fatigue headaches and lackluster outcomes.

The bigger problem here is that most students don't even realize that they're pseudo-working. To them pseudo-work *is* work—it's how they've always done it, and it's how all of their friends do it. It never crosses their mind that there might be a better way. Straight-A students, on the other hand, know all about pseudo-work. They fear it, and for good reason. It not only wastes time, but it's also mentally draining. There is just no way to be well-balanced, happy, and academically successful if you're regularly burning through your free hours in long, painful stretches of inefficient studying. The students I interviewed for this book emphasized again and again the importance of avoiding this trap. In fact, when asked what one skill was most important in becoming a non-grind straight-A student, most of them cited the ability to get work done quickly and with a minimum of wasted effort.

So how do these students achieve this goal? A big part of the solution is timing—they gain efficiency by compressing work into focused bursts. To understand the power of this approach, consider the following simple formula:

work accomplished = time spent x intensity of focus

Pseudo-work features a very low intensity of focus. Therefore, to accomplish something by pseudo-working, you need to spend a lot of time. The straight-A approach, on the other hand, maximizes intensity in order to minimize time. For example, let's rank intensity on a scale of 1 to 10 (with 10 being the most intense). Assume it takes ten hours to finish studying for a test by pseudo-working with a low intensity score of 3. According to our formula, this same amount of work can be accomplished in only three one-hour bursts, each with an intensity of 10. The work that took you all day Sunday to complete could instead be finished by studying an hour after breakfast, an hour after lunch, and an hour after dinner—the rest of the day being free for you to relax!

With this formula in mind, you can begin to understand why many straight-A students actually study *less* than their classmates: They replace long, low-intensity stretches of work with a small number of short, high-intensity sessions. Of course, this is not the whole story behind their success; what straight-A students actually do in these short bursts is also crucial—*technique* is just as important as *timing*. Part Two (Quizzes and Exams) and Part Three (Essays and Papers) of this book are dedicated to these technical details. But learning how to follow an efficient schedule, and banishing pseudo-work from your college experience for good, is a crucial first step toward your academic overhaul.

To accomplish this transformation, however, you will need to gain control over your lifestyle—and that's often no small task. For example, you will need to spread out the intense work sessions so that you have time in between to recharge. This requires basic time-management skills. You're also going to have to overcome your urge to procrastinate, because scheduling your work is meaningless if you don't actually work in the time you set aside. This requires self-motivation. Finally, to obtain the highest possible levels of intensity, you need to choose the right locations, times of day, and durations to study. If you aren't careful about how you select these three factors, you can unintentionally sabotage your ability to focus. This requires a smart planning strategy.

Part One will teach you how to satisfy these requirements. It begins with the presentation of a simple time-management system, customized for the busy college lifestyle. Don't be frightened, the system is incredibly lightweight—it's designed to require only five minutes a day of planning and can survive periods of neglect. Part One then continues with a collection of battle-tested strategies to help you fight procrastination. This advice comes straight from the experiences of real students and has been proven to work amid the chaos and distractions of the typical undergraduate lifestyle—it is simple, easy to apply, and surprisingly effective. This part concludes with a discussion of when during the day, where on campus, and for how long to study to maximize your productivity. The students interviewed for this book experimented extensively to find the right answers to these key questions, and, in this final step, I pass these answers on to you.

Together, these basic skills are the foundation upon which all the advice in this book is built. Without them, you'll be unable to implement the specific study techniques described in the parts that follow. Master them, however, and you will experience improvements in all

aspects of your life—not just grades. You'll have more free time, you'll get the sleep you crave, you'll party harder, and you'll be able to devote more energy to your extracurricular interests. So relax. You are about to take your first step toward a much more enjoyable and productive college experience.

Step 1

Manage Your Time in Five Minutes a Day

Real straight-A students, like most reasonable students, hate time management. After all, college is supposed to be about intellectual curiosity, making new friends, and becoming obsessed with needlessly complicated drinking games. An overwhelming interest in time management is best left to harried business executives (or, perhaps, premeds). At the same time, however, you can't abandon all attempts to keep tabs on your schedule. As mentioned in the Introduction to Part One, all of the techniques described in this book require some ability to control your schedule. Ignore this skill, and you doom yourself to four long years of playing catch-up with your work. As Doris, a straight-A student from Harvard, states: "Time management is critical—it's a skill that you absolutely must develop over the course of your time at college."

Most students, however, misunderstand the purpose of time management—they believe it's used only to cram as much work as possible into the day. But this is not the main motivation behind controlling your schedule. As it turns out, a little planning goes a long way toward reducing your daily stress levels. Having deadlines and obligations floating around in your mind is exhausting—it makes it impossible to completely relax, and, over time, can lead you down the path toward a breakdown. However, once you figure out what work needs to be done and when, it's like a weight being lifted from your shoulders. The uncertainty vanishes: When you work, you can fully concentrate on the assignment in front of you, and when you relax, you can do so without any anxiety. "I don't believe in giving up anything," says Jenna, a straight-A student from Princeton. "Not my social life, not my extracurricular activities, not my academic success." Basic control over your schedule breeds balance. This is why time management, as Doris stated earlier, is the key to getting the most out of all aspects of your college experience.

The goal of Step #1 is to present a time-management system that helps you achieve this stress-free balance without requiring you to sacrifice the spontaneity and excitement of college. Specifically, we present a system tailored to the typical undergraduate lifestyle that meets the following criteria:

1. Requires no more than five to ten minutes of effort in a single twenty-four-hour period.
2. Doesn't force an unchangeable minute-by-minute schedule on your day.
3. Helps you remember, plan, and complete important tasks before the very last moment.
4. Can be quickly restarted after periods of neglect.

We will cover the details of this system in a few simple steps and then conclude with a detailed case study so you can see how it works in a realistic setting.

What You Need

This system requires two pieces of equipment.

1. **A calendar:** It doesn't matter what type of calendar, and it's not something that you have to carry around with you. It can be Microsoft Outlook or iCal on your computer, a cheap day planner, or one of those advertisement-laden freebies they hand out at orientation. It just has to be something that you can reference every morning that has enough space to record *at least a dozen items* for each day.
2. **A list:** Some piece of writing material that you can update throughout the day. This you *do* have to carry around with you, so make it something simple, like a sheet of paper ripped out of a notebook each morning.

The Basic Idea

Record all of your to-dos and deadlines on your calendar. This becomes your master schedule, the one place that stores everything

you need to do. The key to our system, however, is that you need to deal with your calendar only once every twenty-four hours. Each morning, you look at it to figure out what you should try to finish that day. Then, throughout the day, whenever you encounter a new to-do or deadline, simply jot it down on your list. The next morning, you can transfer this new stuff from your list onto your calendar, where it's safe. And we're back where we started.

That's it. Pretty simple, right? The whole system can be summarized in three easy steps: (1) Jot down new tasks and assignments on your list during the day; (2) next morning, transfer these new items from your list onto your calendar; and (3) then take a couple of minutes to plan your day.

Now, we'll examine these steps in a little more detail. In particular, we need some strategies for how to plan your day each morning using your calendar and what to do when unexpected events interfere and turn that plan upside down (trust me, this will happen more often than not).

Update Your Calendar Each Morning

This is where the magic happens. Every morning, spend a few minutes to update your calendar and figure out what you should try to accomplish. This is the only serious time-management thinking you have to do for the whole day, so the demand is pretty reasonable. This updating process should proceed as follows:

Find your list from the day before. It will probably look something like the example described in Figure 1. Don't worry too much about how this list is formatted; we will discuss that shortly. For now, focus

Figure 1. Sample List

Tuesday—1/24/06

Today's Schedule	Things to Remember
~~10:00 to 12:00 Econ class~~	*Econ study group, Thur. at 9 P.M.*
~~12:00 to 1:00 Lunch with Rob~~	*French quiz moved to Friday.*
~~1:00 to 1:45 Government reading~~	*Laundry*
~~2:00 to 4:00 Government class~~	*Start researching summer internship opportunities.*
~~4:00 to 5:30 Finish government reading~~	
5:30 to 6:30 Start French essay	

on the "things to remember" column, which contains the new to-dos and deadlines that were jotted down throughout the day.

Transfer these new items onto your calendar. Write the deadlines on the appropriate dates, and write the to-dos on the days when you plan to complete them. Following the example of our sample list, you would first jot down the econ study group time under Thursday's date and the French quiz under Friday's date. You would then choose a day to do laundry and jot down a reminder under that date, and choose a day to start internship research and jot down a reminder under this date. You can move these items around on your calendar as many times as you want, so don't worry too much about which date you initially choose for a new to-do. However, try to use some common sense. For example, if Wednesday afternoon and evening are packed with meetings and work, this might not be the best day to schedule doing your laundry. Similarly, if you have a big test Monday morning, don't schedule a lot of annoying errands for Sunday;

you'll need your concentration for studying. If something is not especially time sensitive, such as the internship research example from above, don't be afraid to put it on a day far in the future, at a point when you know you will be less busy—such as right after midterms or at the beginning of a new semester.

Next, move the to-dos that you planned for yesterday, but didn't complete, to new days on your calendar. In our sample list from Figure 1, the Today's Schedule column describes to-dos planned from the day before. As you can see, in this example, all the to-dos were completed except the "Start French essay" task, so you would need to move this task to a new date.

At this point, your calendar once again holds everything that you need to get done. Now it's time to figure out your plan for the current day. Go ahead and trash yesterday's list—it's served its purpose—and grab a fresh sheet of paper to use as today's list. Divide it into two columns, as shown in Figure 1, and label them *Today's Schedule* and *Things to Remember*, respectively.

Next, look at the calendar entry for the current day. It will probably contain a handful of appointments and to-dos. Your goal is to figure out how much of this work you can realistically accomplish. You might be tempted to simply copy all of these tasks into your Today's Schedule column and then treat it as a simple to-do list for the day. *Don't do this!* If you want to avoid getting overwhelmed by your work, you need to be smarter about your time.

Here is what you should do instead: **Try to label each of your to-dos for the day with a specific time period during which you are going to complete it.** Be honest. Don't record that you are going to study for three hours starting at three if you know that you have a meeting at five. And be reasonable about how long things really take—don't plan to read two hundred pages in one hour. For simplicity, group many little tasks (errands that take less than ten minutes) into one big block (for example: "*10:00 to 10:45—mail letter, return library book, buy new deodorant, fill out transcript request form at registrar*"). Leave plenty of time for breaks. Give yourself an hour for meals, not twenty minutes. And, if possible, end your day at an appropriate hour; don't try to fit in work right up until sleep time because you need to be able to unwind and relax. In general—though it may seem counterintuitive—be pessimistic. The truth is: Things will come up. Don't assume that every hour that looks free in the morning will stay free throughout the day.

Remember, the goal here is not to squeeze everything into one day at all costs, but rather to find out how many of the tasks listed for the day you actually have time to accomplish. If you can't fit all the to-dos into your schedule for the day, no problem! Simply move the remaining items onto the calendar entries for future dates. You can deal with them later.

Your final step is to record the tasks you will have time for into the Today's Schedule column of your list. As shown in Figure 1, label each task with its time. That's it. You can now reference your list throughout the day to remind yourself of what you should be doing and when.

But here's the important point: The specific times on your schedule aren't set in stone—they're more of a suggestion. As we will discuss shortly, you will be free to move tasks around throughout the day, depending on your energy level and unexpected events that may arise. The main reason you break down your to-dos into time slots is

to help you avoid the common student mistake of overestimating your free time. Many well-intentioned students use a simple to-do list to keep track of their daily obligations. But without time labeling, they have no idea how much they can actually accomplish, leading to an unrealistic plan. A twelve-hour day seems like a large amount of time, but when you account for meals and classes and meetings and breaks and socializing, your schedule suddenly becomes a lot tighter. The equation is simple: If you overestimate your free time, then you are likely to put off work until it's too late. And this leads to all-nighters, panic attacks, and shoddy performance. A realistic sense of time is arguably one of the most important factors in succeeding as a student. After a week or two of time labeling your to-dos, you will be well along your way toward developing this crucial trait.

Use the List During the Day

As you move through your day, use the rough schedule recorded under the Today's Schedule column to remind yourself what you should be doing. Keep in mind that the student lifestyle is, generally, quite unpredictable. Things will always come up at the last minute. Work will take longer than expected, your roommate will point you toward some absurd Web site that immediately demands an afternoon of your scrutiny—you know how it goes. So adjust your time labels as many times as needed. But don't procrastinate excessively! The list you constructed in the morning should contain a reasonable amount of work, so if your schedule doesn't become too unexpectedly crazy, you should be able to accomplish most, if not all, of these tasks. In general, if you're completing most of what's on your list at least five days out of seven, then you're as productive as any student realistically needs to be. If not, don't worry—the next section of Part One will teach you how to combat your urge to procrastinate.

Remember, your list also serves another important purpose. During the day you will probably encounter various *new* to-dos and deadlines that need to be scheduled. For example, a professor might announce the date of an upcoming exam, or a friend might give you the date and time for an upcoming study group. The key is to get these obligations out of your head as soon as possible so your mind is not unnecessarily cluttered. Jot down a quick reminder on your list, in the Things to Remember column, as soon as they occur. This takes only a few seconds, and then you can forget about them. The actual scheduling of these tasks will take place the next morning; all you have to do for now is scribble a few words on a piece of scrap paper.

Remember, to-dos and deadlines that exist only in your mind drain your energy, distract your attention, create stress, and are more likely to be forgotten. When you're working, you should be able to concentrate on working, and when you're relaxing, you should be able to enjoy relaxing. But you can't devote 100 percent of your energy to any activity when you have important reminders bouncing around in your head.

Few students have the energy to schedule every new piece of information that comes along during the day. Think about this for a moment: If it's the middle of the afternoon, and you are hungry, and everyone is just getting up to leave at the end of a long class, when suddenly the professor yells out a notice that a paper topic is due the following week . . . you're probably not going to have the energy to

stop packing up, take out a calendar, think about what steps are involved in coming up with a paper topic, and then schedule each step on the appropriate days. It would be nice if you did, because then you could purge the deadline from your mind and be confident that it's safely recorded in your calendar—but this is unrealistic. And it violates our original criterion that any time-management system should require only a few minutes each day.

That's the power of the "things to remember" column of your list. You can't expect yourself to be able to think seriously about time management at all points during your busy day. But the act of pulling out a piece of scrap paper from your pocket and quickly jotting down "anthro paper topic" requires minimal energy, no thinking, and barely any time. You don't have to consider when to begin working on the paper topic, what steps are involved, or how many days it will require. You simply scribble down three words.

The key is that the list is a trusted piece of storage. You are confident that tomorrow morning, when you're doing your only time-management thinking for the day, you will see that reminder and record the appropriate steps in your calendar. Because of your list, the deadline will not be lost. It will be scheduled.

Restarting After a Period of Neglect

To date, I have yet to have successfully followed any time-management system without interruption for longer than two months. I try, but inevitably I hit a rough patch. Typically, this happens during the few days following a really busy period—I'm so exhausted from the intensity of the preceding work that I find myself unable to even mention the word "to-do" without breaking into a cold sweat. This happens to everyone, and you can expect that periodically it will happen to you too. Don't fear these occasions, and don't let them make you feel like a failure. They're normal.

The key point is that these lapses are temporary. After a couple days of swearing off my calendar, I always find myself growing uncomfortable with the increasing number of obligations that are free floating in my mind. Before I know it, I'm back into the swing of using the system again, and no worse for wear. The same will be true for you. Once you have learned the power of feeling organized, you will have a hard time going long periods without it.

Fortunately, the system described here is adaptable to these periods of neglect. If you skip a few days, all you need to do upon restarting is to dump all the to-dos and deadlines free floating in your mind onto a sheet of paper and then push these back onto your calendar for future dates.

Case Study: A Monday with Stephen

Even the simplest systems can come across as confusing when first described. So let's go through a quick example that will show you how to put this system into practice. Stephen's story is based upon the real-life college experiences of myself and the many students I interviewed. If you're already at college, what follows will seem familiar. If you haven't yet started your undergraduate career, don't panic! Yes, Stephen has a lot on his plate. Notice, however, how he uses our system to keep control of his many obligations. Though he can't finish everything in one day, he remains confident that everything that

needs to get done will get done in time. As you read this example, imagine how Stephen's stress might increase, and his efficiency decrease, if he didn't have his list and calendar to guide his actions and capture the new to-dos and deadlines that constantly pop up.

Monday Morning

Stephen gets up early because he has class at 9:30 A.M.—a horrible thing. He grabs his calendar from his desk and roots around in his hamper to find the sheet of notebook paper that he used as yesterday's list. He has only a couple of minutes before class, but that's okay. Our system requires very little time.

Figure 2 shows what Stephen finds recorded on his calendar for today.

Figure 2. Stephen's calendar entry for Monday

Monday—3/11/07

- *Finish reading for Tuesday Gov class.*
- *Gift for Dad's birthday*
- *First step of research for Gov paper—find books, Xerox relevant chapters.*
- *Pay cell phone bill.*
- *Return Mark's CD.*
- *First half of Econ problem set (due Wed)*
- *Pick topic for Anthro paper (due tomorrow).*
- *Read five chapters from Anthro book (need to catch up for Friday's quiz).*
- *Dinner with guys—7 P.M.—Molly's*
- *Ill-conceived toga party—10 P.M.—Alpha Chi*

Figure 3. Stephen's list from Sunday

Sunday—3/10/07

Today's Schedule	Things to Remember
~~1:00 to 3:00—read article for Anthro.~~	*Call home.*
~~3:00 to 6:00—write Government essay.~~	*Start researching summer internships.*
~~7:00 to 8:00—dinner with Sarah~~	*Create schedule for practicing guitar?*
~~9:00 to 10:00—edit Government essay.~~	
10:00 to 11:00—start reading for Tuesday's Government class	

Figure 3 shows what he finds scrawled on yesterday's list.

There are several things to notice here. First, Stephen has a lot of work recorded on his calendar entry for today. More than he can probably accomplish in twelve hours, so some of these to-dos will need to be moved to other dates. Also notice Stephen's schedule from the day before (Sunday). This is typical. A fun night on Saturday inevitably leads to a late start and a large workload on Sunday. Stephen was too ambitious with his planning, and by 10:00 P.M. he was burnt out from working on his essay and never got around to starting the Government reading he had scheduled. So this task will need to be carried over to today. Finally, notice how Stephen's Things to Remember column from yesterday includes some long-term projects, such as "Create schedule for practicing guitar." This is a great use of the list! If you jot down ideas for extracurricular and personal projects as they occur to you, they will get moved onto your calendar

and therefore won't be forgotten until you finally get around to doing something about them.

Now let's see how Stephen gets a handle on all of this before class.

What Does Stephen Do First?

Stephen's first step is to time label the tasks currently on his plate so he can determine how much he can actually get done. Between his calendar entry for today and the leftovers from yesterday's list, Stephen has a *lot* of to-dos to schedule. His strategy is simple: He starts time labeling in order of importance until his schedule is full, and then moves the rest of the items to other days on the calendar. To effectively time label, however, he must first figure out how much free time he has available. Stephen quickly runs through the following in his head:

> *I have class from **9:30** to **10:30**, and another class from **11:00** to **12:00**. It's unlikely that I will get any work done between my **7:00** P.M. dinner and the Alpha Chi party that starts soon after. I should also try to squeeze in an hour or two for a predinner workout (have to look good in that toga), so I should aim to be done with all of my work by **5:00**.*

With his free time now identified, Stephen can begin to time label his to-dos. Here is his thought process:

> *In between class, from **10:30** to **11:00**, I can squeeze in my three small tasks—pay cell phone bill, buy a birthday gift for Dad, and return Mark's CD. After my second class, I will need to get lunch, but then I should get right to work on my Government reading because it's due tomorrow! Let's see, I have three Government articles to read, which will realistically take two hours, so I will label this task with **1:00** to **3:00**. Hmmmm, I am running out of time here. I need to start that Econ problem set because those suck, and it's due Wednesday morning, so I'll label that task with **3:00** to **4:30**. Okay, I am down to my final half hour. What else has to get done? My Anthro paper topic is due tomorrow, so I will have to squeeze that in at **4:30** to **5:00**. And that's all I have time for.*

At this point, Stephen is almost done. All that's left is taking care of the still-unscheduled to-dos by moving them to future dates. Remember, these include both the unscheduled tasks recorded for the current day and the "things to remember" items from yesterday's list.

> *On yesterday's list I have a reminder to Call home . . . this week is so busy . . . okay, I'll jot that down on the calendar entry for **Friday**. I'll be more relaxed by then. I really don't have time right now for these other two reminders—start internship research and create guitar schedule—so I'll jot those down on the calendar entry for the **first weekend after midterms** are over. I should have more free time then. Okay, what's left? The unlabeled items from today's calendar entry. No problem. I can move the Anthro reading to **tomorrow's** calendar entry, and then move the Government paper research to **Wednesday**—I can work on it after I hand in my Econ problem set. Done!*

That's it. Stephen has finished all of his serious time-management thinking for the day. Before leaving for class, he rips out a fresh sheet

of notebook paper to use for today's list. He divides it into two columns and jots down the tasks he scheduled for the day. Figure 4 shows what Stephen's list looks like as he bolts out the door.

The entire process described above would realistically take only around three to five minutes to complete. The more you use this system, the more natural it becomes. Before you know it, updating your calendar and dashing off a daily schedule will become as routine as taking a morning shower. Remember, this is the only serious time-

Figure 4. Stephen's list on Monday morning

Monday—3/11/07

Today's Schedule	Things to Remember
• *9:30 to 10:30 Class*	
• *10:30 to 11:00—Gift for Dad's birthday, pay cell phone bill, return Mark's CD.*	
• *11:00 to 12:00—Class*	
• *12:00 to 1:00 Lunch/Break*	
• *1:00 to 3:00 Do Government reading assignment.*	
• *3:00 to 4:30 Start work on Econ problem set.*	
• *4:30 to 5:00 Come up with topic for Anthro paper.*	
• *5:00 to 7:00 Get huge.*	
• *7:00 Dinner followed by inevitable embarrassment at toga party (Note to self: Flex a lot at party.)*	

management thinking that Stephen has to do all day. Now he's ready to face his Monday with his mind free from worry about tasks he's forgetting or due dates that are looming. He knows he has scheduled all the tasks on his plate and that they will get done eventually. He has a flexible plan. And he can trust it.

Now let's see how Stephen holds up . . .

During the Day on Monday

The day starts off fine. Stephen successfully finishes the small tasks that he scheduled for **10:30**. During his second class, he remembers that he has some overdue library books that need to be returned. No problem. Stephen whips the list out of his pocket and jots down "*Return books*" under the "Things to Remember" column. A little later, the professor announces the date and time of the midterm—something else that needs to be scheduled. Again, no problem for Stephen. He adds "*Sched. Gov midterm (4/5, 3 P.M.)*" to his list, and then leaves the classroom confident that these tasks will be scheduled appropriately tomorrow morning.

After a leisurely lunch, Stephen hunkers down in the library to tackle his government reading. The articles are a little shorter than usual, so he finishes by **2:30**, which is nice.

As he leaves the library, however, Stephen runs into a friend who convinces him to tag along on a Wal-Mart run. To be honest, it didn't take much convincing. College students, for some inexplicable reason, love Wal-Mart runs.

After this (unavoidable) detour, Stephen gets back to campus by **3:30**. Now he's behind schedule. Quickly checking his e-mail, Stephen sees a message from a classmate asking if he wants to join a study group at 4:00 to work on the Econ problem set. Swiftly adapting,

Stephen once again whips out his list and makes a couple of rapid changes to the Today's Schedule column. He bumps up the Anthro paper topic work to start now, and then replaces his Econ problem set work with the study group that he just found out about. One of the big advantages of this system is its flexibility. Schedules will always change, but this the system makes it easy for you to regain your focus after getting sidetracked. Figure 5 shows the new state of Stephen's list.

Figure 5. Stephen's list Monday afternoon

Monday—3/11/07

Today's Schedule	Things to Remember
• ~~*9:30 to 10:30—Class*~~	• *return books.*
• ~~*10:30 to 11:00—Gift for Dad's birthday; Pay cell phone bill; Return Mark's CD.*~~	• *Sched. Gov midterm (4/5, 3 P.M.)*
• ~~*11:00 to 12:00—Class*~~	
• ~~*12:00 to 1:00—Lunch/Break*~~	
• ~~*1:00 to 3:00—Do Government reading assignment.*~~	
• ***3:30 to 4:00—Choose Anthro paper topic***	
• ***4:00 to 5:00—Work with group on Econ problem set***	
• *5:00 to 7:00—Get huge.*	
• *7:00—Dinner followed by inevitable embarrassment at toga party. (Note to self: Flex a lot at party.)*	

The Anthro work goes fine. Stephen finds a topic that he is happy with and then runs off to meet with his Econ group. During the meeting, the group agrees to meet again Tuesday morning to finish the problem set. Stephen quickly jots down "*Econ group—10 A.M.*" under Things to Remember and then heads off to the gym. He's done with work for the day.

The Aftermath

Because he finished a lot of work during the morning and afternoon before the party, Stephen was able to really relax and have a good time that night. In addition, he successfully recorded all of the new to-dos and deadlines that cropped up during the day. Instead of bouncing around in his head and causing stress, they were safely placed in Stephen's system and will be scheduled in due time. Most important, none of this required him to explicitly think about time management beyond the five minutes he spent planning that morning and the quick rescheduling he did in the afternoon.

As suggested at the beginning of this case study, imagine for a moment what Stephen's day might have been like without the simple time-management system. What if, instead, he'd employed the strategy used by most students and simply tried to remember what he needed to get done? It's highly unlikely that the small tasks—returning a CD, buying a birthday gift, paying a bill—would have been completed. Without a schedule, people don't like to do menial chores unless they're 100 percent necessary. There's also a good chance that he would have forgotten about the Anthro paper topic altogether after the last-minute study group came up.

What about the big-picture reminders from Sunday—calling home, scheduling internships, creating a guitar-practicing schedule?

Those would have been pushed out of his head completely by the demands of near-future deadlines. Without a system to capture them, we can't expect Stephen to remember long-term ideas for any extended period of time.

Most important, without the system, Stephen would have completed much less schoolwork on Monday. The day would have focused, more or less, only on the Government reading, because that was the only big task actually due the next day. Without time labels, Stephen would have had a much hazier understanding of his free time, so he probably wouldn't have started this reading until later in the afternoon (for the most part, students don't like to start any work without a large block of free time ahead of them). Remember, however, that this assignment took a couple of hours to complete, so that means if Stephen had waited until the afternoon to start, he would have finished only this single task by 5:00, with the Econ problem set and Anthro paper topic likely falling by the wayside. Instead, Stephen ended up finishing six tasks by 5:00, leaving plenty of time for exercise and debauchery during the evening.

As you can see from the case study, this simple time-management system, which requires only a few minutes of planning each day, made Stephen significantly more productive and significantly less stressed. It will do the same for you. In other words, five minutes every morning and a sheet of scrap paper in your pocket are enough to transform you from a stressed-out student struggling to get things done, into an organized, relaxed, finely tuned academic machine.

If you remember one lesson from this book, it should be the lesson of this case study: A little organization goes a hell of a long way.

Step 2

Declare War on Procrastination

In the previous section we introduced a simple time-management system to help you plan your day intelligently. That was the easy part. Anyone can spend five minutes to figure out what they *should* be doing. The real challenge is marshaling the motivation to actually do the work once it's scheduled. Without some control over your schedule, you cannot be a happy and successful student—no matter how good your intentions.

As you might expect, in conducting interviews for this book, I put a significant focus on the issue of procrastination. Anyone who makes straight As has clearly found a way to consistently get work done when it needs to be done, and I wanted to find out how. As it turns out, however, I was in for a surprise.

Every student I interviewed was asked the following question:

"How do you defeat procrastination?" As soon as the first responses were returned, it became clear that something was not quite right. I received answers such as:

"I don't."

"Rarely."

"I didn't."

"I don't think that you can."

These were not the responses that I expected—it didn't make sense! Everything else they told me about how they studied and wrote papers clearly indicated that these scholastic studs were kicking some very serious procrastinatory ass, so why were they all claiming they didn't defeat procrastination? What was going on here? Fortunately, many students went on to qualify this first reaction, and it was in these qualifications that I began to figure out what they really meant.

"I don't think that you can," was how Lee, a straight-A student from Columbia, began his answer, but he soon added: "You just have to try to limit it."

Ryan, a straight-A Dartmouth student, started by claiming, "Really, I don't defeat procrastination." But then he continued: "Or, at least, I don't think I do . . . although, I suppose, compared to the majority of students, I'm not as bad as I think."

"I don't know that I've yet defeated procrastination," was how Christine, a straight-A Harvard student, began before concluding: "but I've found ways to make this inevitable tendency less destructive."

Over time, these extended responses began to paint a clear picture. When the straight-A students answered "I don't defeat procrastination," they really meant to say "I don't defeat the *urge* to procrastinate." And this makes perfect sense. To put it simply, some work just plain sucks, and you, like the straight-A students interviewed for this book, will want to procrastinate on this sucky work. It's unavoidable. Therefore, the goal in this step is not to teach you how to love all work and never feel like procrastinating ever again. Instead, I'm going to describe some targeted strategies to help you *sidestep* this unavoidable urge when it arises—not destroy it altogether. This is how straight-A students prevent procrastination from destabilizing their schedule. They don't rely only on willpower and good intentions, but instead deploy an arsenal of specific, tested rules that help them short-circuit their natural desire to procrastinate. These students, of course, aren't perfect, and they still occasionally put off work for no good reason. But overall their strategies made them significantly more effective at following a study plan then their peers—and this made all the difference.

What follows are five anti-procrastination battle plans drawn directly from my straight-A interviews. These techniques are not theoretical; they are exhaustively used by real students to beat down procrastination again and again. Trust them. Put them into practice immediately. Make them into a habit. The effect will be immediate. You may never fully rid yourself of the urge to procrastinate, and that's okay. But with the right strategies in place, you can rid yourself of the fear that you'll always give in to that urge.

Procrastination Battle Plan #1:
Keep a work progress journal

Think about the last time that you procrastinated on something important. You can probably recall some of the wishy-washy excuses your mind concocted for delaying the work. Something along the

lines of *"I don't have all the materials here with me now, but if I waited until tomorrow, I could get started right away with everything I need,"* or *"It's getting late, and my concentration is waning, it would be a waste to start now, so I will wait to tackle this when I'm fresh in the morning."* Why are these excuses necessary? Why don't we simply think: *"This is boring, and I'm lazy, so I'm not going to do it,"* which is much closer to the truth? The answer is that your ego is a powerful force. We procrastinate, but we don't want to admit to ourselves that we procrastinate. So we make excuses to ourselves to avoid the truth.

A work progress journal is a simple tool that takes advantage of this reality to help you defeat procrastination. It works as follows: Buy a cheap spiral notebook, and keep it near your calendar. Each morning, when you work out your schedule for the day, quickly jot down in the notebook the date and the most important tasks that you are scheduled to get done. At the end of the day, if you've completed all of these tasks, simply jot down *all completed*. If you failed to complete some tasks, record this, along with a quick explanation.

The system adds only an extra minute to your morning routine and requires only an extra minute each night before you go to sleep. It's simple enough to turn into a habit. What's amazing, however, is the journal's immediate effect. Having to record, in ink, on paper, that you procrastinated over a task for no good reason is a powerful blow to your ego. It might be easy to *tell* yourself a few weak excuses for putting off a tedious assignment, but when you have to *record* these same excuses on paper their foolishness is exposed. You can no longer get away with lame rationalizations. This is especially true if you continue to delay the same task day after day. After seeing all of those excuses pile up in your journal, there will be no escape from

reality: You are being lazy! Your ego won't like this truth, so it will kick-start your motivation in an effort to avoid it.

The journal, in this way, acts like a personal drill sergeant, sitting on your shoulder and yelling into your ear: *"Soldier, I want you to go get me a pillow, because I know I must be dreaming. I thought I just saw you consider not starting your paper this afternoon, and I knnnoooowwww you wouldn't try to pull that crap with me standing right next to you! Now go grab your notes and get workin' before I make you record your laziness in ink where everyone can see it!"*

Many students, myself included, don't keep a journal all the time, but use it to help them get through unusually busy periods. For example, my work progress journal was a key force in getting me through my senior fall semester, which involved classes, grad school applications, and the writing of my first book. Others have had great success with the journal to keep focused on their LSAT preparation while juggling the demands of regular class work. Some students go so far as to use the system with a friend, agreeing to review each other's journal once a week. As Christine from Harvard suggests: "If you have a friend in the same class, check up on each other's progress." And even if you can't find a willing journal partner, there are other ways to use friends to jump-start your drive: "It helps to simply tell your roommates of your goals, and have them guilt-trip you into working."

Procrastination Battle Plan #2: *Feed the Machine*

Low energy breeds procrastination. Most students know the feeling—your mind starts to feel sluggish, you begin to read whole pages of

text without remembering a single word, and writing coherent notes becomes a Herculean task.

It's almost impossible to motivate yourself to stick to a schedule under these mental conditions. Accordingly, during long work periods, you need to feed your body the fuel it needs to perform at its peak. Think of your brain like a machine. If you want to defeat procrastination, you need to provide it with the energy necessary to concentrate and win the fight. Without proper care, it will turn against you.

The nutritional rules for maximizing your mental energy while studying are simple:

1. **Drink water constantly.** Have a water bottle with you, or make frequent trips to the water fountain. One of my favorite study spots had a dispenser of mini–paper cups next to the fountain. My habit was to drink five mini-cups of water every forty-five minutes. It worked wonders toward keeping my mind humming and my energy high. Your body needs water to function. Hydration increases your energy, masks boredom-induced food cravings, and staves off sleepiness. And don't worry about the inevitable side effect of so much drinking. As Greta, a straight-A Dartmouth student, exults: "Frequent bathroom trips keep me awake."

2. **Monitor your caffeine intake carefully.** Don't drink more than one large caffeinated beverage in any one-hour period. While a Coke or cup of coffee can heighten your concentration, too much caffeine in a short period will make you jumpy and unfocused. If you're a coffee drinker, start off with a strong brew to jump-start your mind, but switch to decaf, tea, or just water for the next hour or two before returning to another strong drink.

3. **Treat food as a source of energy, not satisfaction.** When studying, carefully choose snacks that promise a long-term energy boost. Try vegetables, fruit, anything whole grain, lean proteins, peanuts, or natural granola bars. Refined carbohydrates, such as sugar and white flour, will provide only a quick energy rush followed immediately by a damaging energy drain and increased appetite. Avoid these unhealthy snacks at all costs while working. If you follow rule one, your frequent water consumption will dull the cravings for specific foods, making it much easier to stick with healthier fare.

4. **Don't skip meals.** Snacks alone are not enough to fuel your mind for long periods. Even on the busiest of days, eat regular meals. If you skip breakfast to get a jump start on studying, or put off lunch until the late afternoon so you can finish your reading, you will experience more hunger than your snacks can effectively satisfy. Hunger, and the corresponding low blood sugar, will rob you of your ability to concentrate and set you up to succumb to procrastination. So keep your meals regular. If you're pressed for time, eat fast. Grab a sandwich from a less-populated dining hall and sit alone, or bring part of the meal back to your study location. But never miss meals altogether.

Procrastination Battle Plan #3: *Make an event out of the worst tasks*

Some tasks are so horrible that even just the thought of beginning them can send chills down your spine. For me, these included writing personal statements for graduate school applications. Other students cringe at having to type the first few paragraphs of a long paper, composing cover letters for job applications, or beginning the slog through a hopelessly large reading assignment on a hopelessly boring topic (I can't help but remember one particularly descriptive article I had to read about the various clays used in ancient Cypriot vase-making).

It seems to take an extraordinary effort to start these projects before the last possible minute. But it doesn't have to be this difficult. As Laura, a straight-A Dartmouth student, explains: "When studying for something I don't especially enjoy, I try to make an event out of it." Find an out-of-the-way restaurant, coffee shop, or bookstore café. It helps if your location is farther than walking distance from campus. Set a time to bring your work there, and if you don't have a car, arrange to be dropped off and picked up later, or choose a location that takes a while to reach by foot so you won't be tempted to leave right away. Tell everyone you know that you will be gone during this time, and talk up how horrible the work is that you have to complete. The more people who know about your quest, the harder it will be for you to cancel it.

The novelty of the location, plus its distance from campus, will help jump-start your motivation to tackle your horrible task once there.

"I find the change of scenery puts your body in work mode, just as going to the office is supposed to," explains Sean, a straight-A student from Yale. You went through a lot of effort to get to your unusual study nook, and there is no easy way to be distracted. Campus is far away, and therefore so are your friends, your TV, the student center, and your Internet connection. You are sitting alone at a table in a public place, surrounded by strangers, and if you don't start doing something soon, people will begin to wonder: *Who is that odd student sitting alone and staring into space? Is she a drifter? Is she going to snap and kill us all? What's her deal?*

"It's just too awkward to sit there while staring at other people," says Laura, "so inevitably I will end up reading whatever material I've brought with me." As always, the hardest part is beginning. But once you start slogging through your assignment, the pain will slip away, you will hit your stride, and before you know it, your ride will have arrived and that once terrifying task will be safely completed.

Procrastination Battle Plan #4: *Build a routine*

Your schedule varies each day. But you should be able to identify at least one hour, on each weekday, that is consistently free. If you have an early class, make this the hour right after it lets out. If you have a late morning class, make this the hour right before it starts. In general, the morning and early afternoon are the best times to find these consistently free hours. Time in the late afternoon and evening is much more susceptible to being hijacked by unexpected events as your friends finish up their classes and start knocking on your door.

Once you've identified these protected hours, use them to do the same work each week. For example, maybe Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are for chipping away at your History reading assign-

ments, and Tuesdays and Thursdays are for making progress on your weekly Statistics problem set. The idea is to build a routine in which you use the same reserved time slot each week to do the same thing, with the goal of transforming these slices of work into a habit, something you no longer have to convince yourself to do.

"I figured out pretty early on the most annoying thing about bad habits—namely, their tenacity—could be very useful if it was applied to other things," explains Simon, a straight-A student from Brown. "I found that good habits, like making sure I do [certain work at the same time each week], are really hard to get rid of."

Unfortunately, these five hours a week are probably not enough to complete all of your work (if only that were true!). But they do represent five hours of productivity that didn't exist before. And, more important, the first work of the day breaks the seal on your motivation. Once you have accomplished one big task, it becomes much easier to tackle more. So follow Simon's advice, and let this simple good habit greatly reduce the effort required to launch a productive day.

Procrastination Battle Plan #5: *Choose your hard days*

Hard days are inescapable at college. Sometimes you simply have more work due than you can handle with a well-balanced schedule. In these cases, relaxation and socializing have to take a backseat to your study obligations. As Jeremy, a straight-A student from Dartmouth, admits: "Occasionally I end up setting aside one full day where I just lock myself in my room with some food and grind through it." You can't avoid these hard days, but you can control their impact.

If you see a large number of deadlines looming just over the horizon, you can be sure that there will be some hard days in your near future. Here's the secret: Plan them in advance. Don't wait until the deadlines are so close that you have no choice but to buckle down. Instead, scout out one or two days to preemptively designate as "hard." By choosing them ahead of time, you can space them out so that you never have two hard days in a row, and you won't be caught off guard by this sudden burst of intensity. Try to plan relaxing, nonacademic activities immediately before and after these days. This will ease their impact. As Jeremy explains: "If I work all day Saturday, I will let myself go out hard on Saturday night and take Sunday off."

In addition, you should prepare yourself mentally. Tell friends which days are going to be hard, warn them not to expect much communication from you, and ask for their encouragement. If all of your friends know that Tuesday is going to be a rough day for you, then you will be much more likely to keep busy and do the work. It would be embarrassing, after all, to talk up your upcoming hard day, garnering sympathy and support from friends, and then be discovered that afternoon, still in your boxers, experimenting with the use of your toes as an alternative to your missing remote control.

By proactively scheduling hard days on a regular basis, you reduce their negative impact. When you are forced into an all-day work marathon against your wishes, you feel drained and abused. If that same day has been planned and hyped for the past week, you'll come away feeling invigorated by your accomplishment. You expected the challenge, prepared for the challenge, and survived it. This strategy is more psychological than time saving, but the effect is powerful. Take ownership of your schedule and you are more likely to respect it.

Step 3

Choose When, Where, and How Long

The little things count. This is especially true when it comes to studying. Before we get caught up in the details of exactly how to review and synthesize material, there are some basic questions that we must address first: *When* during the day should you study? *Where* should you go to study? *How long* should you study before taking a break? The right answers to these questions will boost your productivity, allowing you to squeeze more work out of even less time. The wrong answers will slow you down and make this process more difficult than it needs to be. Straight-A students, I found out, devote a lot of thought to these questions; they recognize how these seemingly little details can make or break their study efforts and have experimented extensively to discover the most effective strategies. Step #3 will walk you through the results of these experiments and present tested approaches for each of these three crucial study skills.

QUESTION: When is the best time to study?
ANSWER: *Early.*

"I like doing work in one big chunk upon getting back from class, or doing it in between classes, depending on my schedule," says Simon from Brown. "I try to never leave it until late at night." Simon's plan emphasizes an important reality about studying: You're most effective between when you wake up and when you eat dinner. You should accomplish as much work as possible during this time.

This advice runs counter to most students' instincts. To many, the evening seems ideal for work. Why? Because the morning and afternoon are crowded. Classes, meals, meetings, and other activities take over these hours, leaving few continuous periods for really settling in and getting things done. Night, on the other hand, seems like one long, uninterrupted stretch of good work time. Right? Wrong!

First, nighttime is not as long as you think. By the time you finish dinner, gather your materials, and finally begin your work, you really have only a few hours left before it becomes too late and your desire to sleep hijacks your concentration.

Second, nighttime is not as free as you think. It's prime time. Inevitably some can't-miss TV show nags for your attention, or the loud music of a party down the hall beckons seductively. Night is when people most want to socialize. You see movies at night. You go to parties at night. Shows, speakers, and other campus performances happen at night. People gather back at their dorm rooms to gossip

and distract each other. Few among us have achieved the required level of nerd-dom necessary to resist such temptations—and we shouldn't have to.

Finally, nighttime is when your body begins to wind down. After a long day of activity, it's ready to begin a slow descent into sleep. Even before it gets late, the energy available to your mind has already declined. By 7:00 or 8:00 P.M., your focus is weak at best.

For these reasons, you must minimize the amount of work you do after dinner. At the same time, however, it's true that working during the day can also be complicated. As mentioned, there are few continuous stretches of free time in the morning and afternoon. Don't fear this fractured schedule. Bring your materials with you throughout the day, and fill in any small patches of free time with productive work. As Wendy, a straight-A student from Amherst, explains: "I try to take a book I need to read along with me all the time, in case some free time pops up while I'm doing something else." Doris, from Harvard, has a similar philosophy, admitting that she sneaks in work between meetings or classes, using small blocks of thirty or forty-five minutes at a time. If you follow this approach, you'll be surprised at the amount of work you can squeeze into your hectic daytime schedule.

The trick is to be efficient. If you have an hour in between classes, head straight from the first class to a library, or similar study location, near the second class. Mentally prepare yourself on the way over so that when you hit the study spot you can become productive within seconds. Also, be sure to avoid your dorm room or other public places as much as possible during the day. You need to separate your work mind-set from your relaxation mind-set. By hanging around your room, or the student center, you are much more likely to become distracted and let a potentially productive work period slip away at the expense of a mundane conversation. Become a ghost during the day. Like an academic ninja, slip from hidden study spot to hidden study spot, leaving only an eerie trail of completed work behind you (see the next question, *"Where should you study?"* for more advice on choosing the right locations).

The idea here is not to become antisocial. When you're done for the day, feel free to go have fun! Party like a demon. You aren't missing out on an important social event by avoiding some half-assed gossip between classes. The more meaningful experiences will happen later, at the frats or in your dorm room after everyone is done with classes for the day. Remember: *"Work hard, play hard"* is always better than *"Work kind of hard, play kind of hard."*

In addition to the extra energy and better focus that you gain by studying early, the spread-out nature of this schedule makes it less of a strain. Working for forty-five minutes, running to class, working for an hour, going to another class, then working another forty-five minutes before grabbing lunch is much less odious then sitting down and working for two and a half hours straight. This approach also makes optimal use of your time. Most students simply waste these free chunks during the day. By taking advantage of daytime study pockets, you're freeing up valuable nighttime hours to go out and have the sort of fun that defines the college experience.

QUESTION: Where should you study?
ANSWER: *In isolation.*

Identify a number of isolated study spots spread out across campus and rotate through these hidden locations when you study. Any

place in your dorm or house is off-limits, as are the big public study spaces in your main library. As Greta from Dartmouth explains: "If you stay in your dorm, it seems like no one is studying . . . because they aren't." This atmosphere is not conducive to concentration. Look for less-visited libraries away from the center of campus, and search out carrels high up in the stacks or buried down in the basement. Always keep your eyes open for the next great hidden study spot—small libraries in the buildings of student organizations, a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop, or the local public library are all potential concentration gold mines.

You need multiple locations for two reasons. First, as you move through your day, squeezing in study sessions between classes, it's nice to always know of a nearby study spot. Second, changing locations prevents you from burning out at any one place. This is the strategy followed by Doris from Harvard, who explains: "to keep my mind stimulated, I regularly rotate between different venues."

The isolation of these spots is important for the obvious reason: It shields you from distraction. That little procrastination devil on your shoulder is an incredible salesman. If you give him even a glimpse of an alternative to your work, then he will close the deal. To neutralize this devil, isolate him. Don't let him see your couch, the cute girls tossing Frisbees on the quad, or your friends chatting in your dorm room lounge. If you cut yourself off from the outside world during your work hours, then you have a much better chance of completing what needs to get done, and, as an added bonus, the resulting increase in concentration will help you get your work done faster.

Many students will admit that there is something a bit dramatic about working in exaggerated isolation. It may sound corny, but quarantining yourself in a study bunker seems to increase the importance of the work you are about to tackle. You can almost imagine the voice of a grave military officer saying, "Son, we're all counting on you . . . good luck," as you head off to your silent nook. This kind of gravitas is lacking when you flop down on your couch with a textbook propped up on your chest and your roommate in the chair next to you struggling to learn an obnoxious Dave Matthews song on his out-of-tune guitar. As Christine from Harvard states plainly: "Studying in bed has never worked."

These mind games are not trite. Don't underestimate the importance of psychology in becoming an effective student. Almost every straight-A student interviewed for this book followed some variant of this isolation strategy. Some went so far as to wear earplugs or travel great distances from campus to eliminate any chance of distraction. They understood the mental edge their surroundings provided—and you should, too.

QUESTION: How long should you study?

ANSWER: No more than one hour at a time without a break.

Your break needs to be only five to ten minutes, but it's important that you take an intellectual breather during this period. This means you should find something you can concentrate on, for just a few minutes, which has nothing to do with the work you were completing right before the break. Read a newspaper article or send a few e-mails. That should be enough. This disengagement helps refresh your mind and facilitates the process of finding new angles and in-

sights when you begin your work again. Some students brought a novel or newspaper with them, and then read a chapter or an article at every break. Others chose a project for the day—perhaps writing a long e-mail to a friend they hadn't seen in ages, or building a list of options for an upcoming vacation—that they could work on bit by bit with each break they took.

Even when you feel like you are on a roll, keep taking regular breaks. Over the long run, it will maximize your energy and retention of the material. As Laura from Dartmouth recounts: "I swear I get more done taking regular breaks than I would if I just worked straight through."

Why does this timing work the best? I don't know exactly. Some cognitive science research concludes that about fifty minutes is the optimal learning period to maximize the material synthesized per time unit. For example, the Web site for the IPFW Center for Academic Support and Advancement states: "Studies suggest you should study in 40 or 50 minute increments for maximum retention. After approximately 40 minutes, take a short break (5 minutes) and continue studying. Without a break, retention is about 30% after 2 hours."* But we don't have to get bogged down with these scientific details. The main reason I advocate this timing is because almost every straight-A student interviewed for this book followed a similar plan. When asked how long they studied in a single sitting, all but a few of their answers fell somewhere between half an hour and an hour:

"Not more than an hour," replied Chris.

*http://www.ipfw.edu/casa/SI/sistudy.html

"One hour, then I get up and do something else for a bit," replied Melanie.

"About forty minutes to an hour," replied Ryan.

"One hour on, fifteen minutes off," replied Lydia.

"One to one and a half hours. Then I would always take a break," replied Lacey.

And the list goes on, as response after response revealed a similar strategy. The point here should be clear: Through trial and error, dozens of high-performing students have individually stumbled across this same technique—study for an hour, then take a break—so you should trust it too.