

How to Get Out of Ten Study Traps

Reprinted with permission from Iowa State University

1. “I don’t know where to begin.”

Take control. Make a list of all the things you have to do. Break your workload down into manageable chunks. Prioritize! Schedule your time realistically. Use hours in between classes to review notes. Interrupt study time with planned study breaks. Begin studying early, with an hour or two per day, and slowly build as the exam approaches.

2. “I’ve got so much to study...and so little time.”

Preview. Survey your syllabus, reading material, and notes. Identify the most important topics emphasized and the topics you don’t quite have a grasp of yet and concentrate on those. But remember, previewing is not a substitute for reading.

3. “This stuff is so dry. I can’t even stay awake reading it.”

Attack! Get actively involved with the text as you read. Ask yourself, “What is important to remember about this section?” Take notes or underline key concepts. Discuss the material with others in your class. Study together. Stay on the offensive, especially with material that you don’t find interesting, rather than reading passively and missing important points. Remember, not everything can be interesting to everybody!

4. “I read it. I understand it. I just can’t get it to sink in.”

Elaborate. We remember best the things that are most meaningful to us. As you are reading, try to elaborate on new information with your own examples. Try to integrate what you’re studying with what you already know. You will be able to remember new material better if you can link it to something that’s already meaningful to you. Some techniques include:

- **Chunking:** For example, suppose you wanted to remember the colors in the visible spectrum (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet); you would have to memorize seven “chunks” of information in order. But if you take the first letter of each color, you can spell the name “Roy G. Biv” and reduce the information to three “chunks.”
- **Mnemonics:** For example, to remember a formula or equation, one may use letters of the alphabet to represent certain numbers. Then one can change an abstract formula into a more meaningful word or phrase making it easier to remember. Sound-alike associations can also be very effective, especially while trying to learn a new language. The key is to create your own links, and then you won’t forget them.

5. “I guess I understand it.”

Test yourself. Make up questions about key sections in notes or reading. Keep in mind what the professor has stressed in the course. Examine the relationships between concepts and sections. Often, simply by changing section headings you can generate many effective questions. For example, a section entitled “Bystander Apathy” might be changed into a question such as “What is bystander apathy?” “What are the causes of bystander apathy?” and “What are some examples of bystander apathy?”

6. “There’s too much to remember.”

Organize. Information is recalled better if it is represented in an organized framework that will make retrieval more systematic. There are many techniques that can help you organize new information, including:

- Write chapter outlines or summaries and emphasize relationships between sections.
- Group information into categories or hierarchies where possible
- Information Mapping. For example, if you were trying to understand the causes of World War I, you could make a chart listing all the major countries involved across the top, and then list the important issues and events down the side. Next, in the boxes in between, you could describe the impact each issue had on each country to help you understand these complex historical developments.

7. “I knew it a minute ago.”

Review. After reading a section, try to recall the information contained in it. Try answering the questions you made up for that section. If you cannot recall enough, re-read portions you had trouble remembering. The more time you spend studying, the more you tend to recall. Even after the point where information can be perfectly recalled, further study makes the material less likely to be forgotten entirely. In other words, you can’t over-study. However, how you organize and integrate new information is still more important than how much time you spend studying.

8. “But I like to study in bed.”

Context. Recall is better when study context (physical location, as well as mental, emotional, and physical state) are similar to the test context. The greater the similarity between the study setting and the test setting, the greater the likelihood that material studied will be recalled during the test.

9. “Cramming before a test helps me keep it fresh in my mind.”

Spacing. Start studying now. Keep studying as you go along. Begin with an hour or two a day about one week before the exam, and then increase study time as the exam approaches.

10. “I’m going to stay up all night until I get this.”

Avoid mental exhaustion. Take short breaks often when studying. Before a test, have a rested mind. When you take a study break, and just before you go to sleep at night, don’t think about academics. Relax and unwind, mentally and physically. Otherwise, your break won’t refresh you, and you’ll find yourself lying awake at night. It’s more important than ever to take care of yourself before an exam. Eat well, sleep, and get enough exercise.