

The following is an excerpt from HOW TO SUCCEED AT SCHOOL:

LETTERS OF A PROFESSOR TO HIS DAUGHTER

Dear Lili,

I just wanted to get back to the number one concern on the list that mentioned at the beginning of the semester, namely, self-discipline. The largest “secret” about discipline as far as course management is concerned is anticipation. The successful students are one character ahead of the professor, rather than one (or more!) chapters behind and thus constantly playing “catch-up.” Read the material before the professor’s lecture, now have a frame of reference with which to make the professor’s lecture meaningful. Frequently, when you haven’t already read the material on which the professor is commenting or trying to explain, you literally do not know what he is talking about.

My theory about performance in college is that anything else (in a typical course) is study skills, more than perhaps intelligence or motivation. I believe for most college courses, a student of average ability can get an “A” with good study skills. And paramount among good study skills is learning to anticipate the professor by keeping one chapter ahead (which takes a lot of discipline, granted).

Related to this, of course, is attendance. Good study skills imply coming to class. As you have probably discovered already, getting someone else’s notes is not even a reasonable facsimile of having been in that class yourself. In a course like statistics I estimate that it takes roughly triple the

time to learn the material on your own (with the best notes) as it does by being there in the class. Cutting class is very poor economy of time.

So, you want to get all “A’s.” Don’t miss any classes, take good notes, stay one chapter ahead of the professor, and turn in assignments on time. The rest should be easy!

Related to this, of course, is the cardinal sin of procrastination! When students do not get a good grade in my courses, it’s usually due to one of two reasons: (1) severe absenteeism, or (2) waiting until the last possible minute to write a paper, study for a quiz or exam, and/or missing deadlines for assignments; in a word, *procrastination*.

How do you avoid procrastination? There are a number of suggestions that have been made, but I find the following most helpful:

1. *Get an early start.* (It’s really a question of breaking old habits.) Think of it as working up to 24 hours ahead of yourself, and then it is just a matter of maintaining status quo.
2. *Make two time schedules: one for the semester and one for the day.* As soon as you are informed of deadlines in your various courses, insert them in your semester schedule so that you see what’s coming up in advance. I can’t tell you the number of times students have told me that they forgot about a quiz date or term paper deadline even though it was clearly stipulated on the

syllabus distributed of the first day of class. I find the “Week-at-a-Glance” appointment books the most helpful. Other people prefer the large desk pad calendars.

3. *Aim for Completing tasks a few days earlier than when they are due.* This way, if for some unforeseen reason you miss the early self-imposed deadline, you still have time to meet the real deadline. Students have a lot of trouble dealing with contingencies like illness because of this last minute approach.
4. *Reward yourself for meeting your own deadlines.* This is form of behavior modification that you can utilize for self-management of behavior. Not only is there an inherent reward of anxiety relief once a task is completed and on time, but now there is an additional incentive. Since B.B. Skinner has demonstrated that behavior pretty much is a result of what he calls reinforcement (he feels the word “reward” is not scientific enough), there is no reason why you shouldn’t use this principle toward regulating (and change if necessary) your own behavior. By “reward” I mean a thing that reinforces or makes it more likely to occur the next time, like a treat, or a movie, or watching a favorite TV program, or going to a party, etc.
5. *Take some “quiet time” and meditate.* See if you get in touch with any resistance to the task that may be working unconsciously. If so, discover what they are and work toward eliminating them. For example, I see a lot of resistance to giving presentations

in class, based on fear. Because the resistance is unconscious and unacknowledged, it operates to subvert the student’s best intentions. For example, one student fell on the stairs on the way to class on the day she was to give her presentation. Another student developed laryngitis the day before her presentation was due. It’s very important to become aware of these resistances before you can begin to overcome them.

Well, Lil, I hope that gives you some ideas on using your time better. Remember that time is one of the most precious things we have and learning how to budget your time is one of the most important skills to be perfected in college. By the time you graduate you should be finding many more hours in the day than you do now!

Love,

Dad

If you are interested in purchasing a copy of HOW SUCCEED AT SCHOOL: LETTERS OF A PROFESSOR TO HIS DAUGHTER by John D. Lawry, please contact the publisher, Sheed & Ward, at 1-800-333-7373. You may write to them at: 115 E. Armour Blvd., P.O. Box 419492, Kansas City, MO 64141-6492. The book is priced at \$6.95.

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