

# How I got all A's in School: Confessions of an Aggressive Learner

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- 1. Master the structure of the course.** Get a sense of the whole course by carefully reading the syllabus. Read it forward; then read it backward. Get an image of the 'course/ journey:' where this course is going, how it will get there, and what are its goals. Use this image as the context for the many classes and assignments of the course so you understand how these pieces/classes/assignments fit into the organic whole called the course. You should know before you start the course where it is going to lead/end. 'Stand back' and see the structure of the course and how its components fit in. Establish the 'roadmap.'
- 2. Prepare specifically for each class.** Put it in the context of the previous class; look back at your notes (see #3 below); go over the textbook or assignment carefully for this class so you get a sense of its structure/goals; add how this class fits in to your 'image' of the whole course (#1 above); in reading a textbook or article, read the conclusion/ summary first; then go back and read the headings and topic sentences to get a sense of the organization of the assignment; then read the chapter/article, pencil in hand.
- 3. Listen intently and take careful notes,** do not write down what the instructor says but...
  - Reformulate/restructure what is said to give it an organization that you develop (avoid the definition of a lecture as 'what passes from the teacher's notes to the students' notes without passing through the mind of either!')
  - Don't just accept what is being said without reacting: in the back of your mind have a series of questions: how does what the teacher is communicating or other students are saying fit into what I already know? Are my notes clear? Does what is being said make sense to me? What questions does it raise? What do you find interesting, disturbing, illuminating, perplexing?
  - Three columns. Take all your notes during class on 2/3rds of the right side of the page, leaving a left margin for additional comments. As soon as possible after the class, go over your notes carefully, filling in gaps, jotting down your reactions, questions, whatever occurs to you. Then use the 1/3rd of the page left blank for two more columns; in the column next to the notes, put in headings for the material that is covered in the text of the notes on the right; in the column farthest to the left, put in mega-headings that summarize the headings noted in the middle column to the immediate right. Again you are developing a structure into which the components of your learning fit.
  - Student insights: Don't think that only what the teacher says is important; anything that a student says that you find interesting or illuminating, write down.
- 4. Review notes from prior class:** Before the next class, review the textbook/ assignment and the notes you have taken in #3 above as the context for the upcoming class.
- 5. Mark what you read:** Read an article or textbook with your sharp pencil in hand (magic markers are limited because you can't write in structure/special notes; pencil is better than pen because you can erase (ask for an electric pencil sharpener for your next

birthday!); read actively; as noted above, don't just start reading, but start with the summary or conclusion, carefully go over headings and topic sentences to acquire the structure of the reading; keep this structure in mind as you begin and continue reading. Don't just 'read' but aggressively master the text.

6. **Before exams, review your notes** and fix in your mind the structure of the material in your notes for the exam; start with the mega-headings in the left column; then go back and associate the headings in the second column with those in the first; then use the detailed notes to the extent that it is useful to fill in your understanding of the headings/concepts. The same approach should be used when reviewing textbooks or articles; your work in outlining/developing structure will pay rich dividends when you can review in a short time your extensive notes and readings by using the summaries and outline/structure to recall the material.

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