

To become an effective and efficient learner—whether for schoolwork or professional development—you need a well-stocked tool kit. Check our list and see how many tools you use.

FOCUS AND MOTIVATION

- Create a quiet place to study** that is comfortable and uncluttered. If music helps you tune out distractions, set it up to play beforehand so you don't have to fiddle with it.
- Visualize the ultimate goal** to motivate yourself (the research project completed or the math test marked with an A) before you begin your work for the day.
- If you tend to get fidgety, **read on an exercise bike**, or chew gum. Put a porcupine ball (a nubby rubber ball) on the floor and let your bare feet roll it around while you work.
- When your mind wanders to something else you want to do, **write down your distractions** to deal with later (this will help you let them go and get back to focused work).
- Take frequent short breaks** before you get stuck or frustrated. Walk the dog. Bike around the block. Get your blood pumping. Breathe deeply. Don't let your breaks take so long you lose your momentum—enjoy your break, and then get back to work.
- For difficult or dreaded tasks, **use the 10-minute rule**: Work on it for ten minutes at a time (the timer is your friend!). Take a break or work on something else, and then do another ten minutes. You'll quickly start to make headway and that will encourage you.
- Be persistent.** Set a task goal for yourself (with a reward when it's completed), and stick with it.
- Consider how you decide to spend your time. **Apply the 10-10-10 rule**, asking yourself "How will this decision affect my life 10 minutes from now, 10 months from now, 10 years from now?"
- Get regular exercise and adequate sleep** to improve your focus, concentration, and productivity. Added bonus: you'll just plain feel better.

TIME MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

- Plan a to-do list for each day.** Set specific goals ("Write outline for history research paper; do math practice test"); keep the list short—about 5 items—and refer back to it often to stay on track.
- Prioritize your list.** Divide it into three categories: things that need to be done today; things to do after the top-priority items are finished; things that can wait until another day if necessary.
- Schedule time for distraction-free work** each day. Turn off the cell phone, log out of chat windows, and ignore incoming email. (You'll be surprised how much you can accomplish in a very short time when you are fully focused.)
- Organize your workspace** (and computer files) so everything is close at hand when you need it.
- Eliminate time wasters** like checking email, Facebook, texts and Twitter throughout the day. Check messages once before you begin work and then when you are finished.
- Survey the material before you begin** reading (chapter title, section headers, graphics, photo captions, etc.) to get the gist of things before getting down to details.
- Set a timer** for one hour of focused, distraction-free time. When it rings, take a 10 minute break to stretch, or get a snack. Set a timer for your break, too, and when it rings, begin another distraction-free focus hour.
- Before writing a paper, **review your notes.** It will save you time in the long run.
- Don't waste time obsessing** over unimportant details. Nothing is ever perfect. Just do your best, and then move on.
- When you are finished for the day, **put everything away** where it belongs so you can find it again when you need it. If you need to, take a photo when your room or desk is organized, and then refer to it later when cleaning up.
- Use a **calendar** to keep track of long-term assignment deadlines, course end dates, vacation dates, social, or work commitments.

NOTE TAKING AND CRITICAL READING

- Get in the habit of active reading.** Look up a word you don't know, underline something you find interesting, put a question mark by something you don't understand. Use colored highlighters to help you keep track of things better.
- You will **read with purpose** if you are trying find out the answer. So, when reading a textbook, reword the section header or chapter title as a question: What were the major tenets of the Constitution?
- Divide large passages into smaller sections and **keep asking yourself questions** along the way: "Do I understand what's going on here?" If not, reread or ask questions. This self-check will help you keep focused and make sure you comprehend the material.
- Use the two-column strategy for note-taking**: main ideas on the left and details on the right. Focus on main ideas first, and then details. Test yourself by folding the paper in half.
- Take the time to **do a quality job.** Correcting mistakes on sloppy work will cost you more time in the long run.

REMEMBERING

- Study at the time of day you are most alert.** For most teens, this means during the day and early evening.
- Take good notes while you read.** Typing handwritten notes into the computer lets you go over the material a second time. Rewrite your notes into full sentences and then proofread for errors and to get the info more solidly in your head (reading aloud helps).
- Make sure you **understand the material**; memorizing isn't enough.
- Put down your notes and **teach what you just learned** to an imaginary audience. Put everything into your own words, and speak with enthusiasm (you might want to be alone when you do this!). Walk around and use gestures—moving will help you remember, too.
- Use your imagination** to picture things in your head with as much sensory detail as possible (like playing the movie version of the book)—add movement, color, sound, smell, touch.
- Practice makes permanent.** Go over your notes and review the reading material several times over the course of several days—repetition is important to converting a short term memory into a long-term one.
- Review previous material** before you add new information. This helps you connect the new information to what you already know, which will add relevance to it and make it easier to remember.

