

Gould's Guide to Great Grades (Groan!)

Professor Mark D. Gould (1946-1999) was the Founding Director of the Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED) and the Forrest C. Lattner Professor of Environmental Science. A captivating and talented teacher, the annual RWU teacher of the year award is now named in his honor. The following are a few of his suggestions on how to achieve academic excellence. **All students can benefit immensely from these little pearls of wisdom...**

**Studying is an acquired skill, just like carpentry, cooking, swimming, or dance.
Here are some guidelines on how to become an excellent student.**

- 1) Don't cut class, unless you are too sick to drag your body there. Even in large classes, professors notice who attends and who doesn't. And they care! If you must miss a class, always get the notes from someone who does well in that class. Copy these notes by hand (as in #3, below), even if you photocopy them initially.
- 2) Always take notes in class. Always note everything the professor says, even if the professor says "this isn't especially important." Make your notes as thorough as possible; practice so that eventually you are able to write down almost everything said.
- 3) Copy your raw class notes over into another notebook, This should be done ASAP, preferably on the same day you had that class. Copying material over really helps you learn it. This is one of the best habits you can get into, and you'll find that as you copy you recall things that were said that you forgot to write down. You'll also see where there is material you don't fully understand.
- 4) If you don't understand something, ask for an explanation. Most professors will say, at the beginning of a lecture, "Is there anything from last time that you need clarified/explained, etc.?" That is the time to speak up! There is no such thing as a stupid question! The only stupid thing you can do is pretend to understand something when you don't. And don't be embarrassed to ask questions, thinking that the other students all understand--chances are there will be many others who'll be thrilled you had the courage to speak up!
- 5) After every class, review all of your notes for that class to date. You know what that means? By the time you get to an exam, you're very likely to know the material backwards and forwards. It is very helpful, when you read over class notes to highlight key phrases and passages. After that, write some key words in the margins, to help you focus on important concepts. Again, when it comes time for an exam, you will have read the notes so many times that just reviewing the words in the margins will refresh your memory.
- 6) Studying from the text. When you first get a textbook, look it over like an explorer. Who wrote it? What do they have to say in the introduction? How is the material organized? Get a feel for how the table of contents and the index are organized. See what kinds of appendices the book has (this can be especially important in biology and chemistry texts), and look over the glossary. Remember that a textbook is a tool for learning-get to know how to use it.

The first time you read a chapter in a text, read it like a novel, right through. At the end of the chapter, ask yourself what the chapter, in general, was about.

Read the chapter a second time. This time, stop after every paragraph and ask yourself what it said (the general concepts). If you didn't understand, read that paragraph again until you do understand. Scientific material can be very tough to read, mainly because there are so many words that have very precise

definitions. Don't let that discourage you! Learn to use the glossary of terms, and to look words up. Keep going over definitions until you are sure you understand exactly what the word means. If it helps you, keep a card file of scientific terms and their definitions.

Read the chapter a third time. This time, outline it, and/or highlight key passages. If there are review questions at the end of the chapter, do them and write down the answers. If you can't answer some of them, ask the professor for help.

If you do these things, when it comes time to study for a midterm or final, you will mostly just need to go over the outline or highlighted parts. But remember to use the outline or highlighting--study from them. Just the act of outlining doesn't mean you've actually learned the material--you may still have to review it several times before you know it.

7) If you consistently have problems understanding a text, find a text on the same topic by a different author, and see if that can help you. Often a different wording can make all the difference.

8) Studying for an exam. If you have done everything suggested above, studying for an exam is a matter of reviewing, not panicking!

Read over all your class notes; make sure you know them.

Read over the outlined or highlighted material in the text; make sure you know it.

Review the text questions and their answers.

Sometimes the professor will have put old exams on file at the library; if so, look them over to see the kinds of questions the teacher likes.

Make sure you understand the broad concepts, as well as the details.

9) Questions NOT to ask a professor:

Q. Will this be on the test?

A. You should assume everything will be on the test!

Q. Do we need to know this?

A. You should assume you need to know everything!

Q. Why did you give me a "C" on this?

A. In reality, the professor didn't give you a "C", you earned one.

Q. Can I do an extra credit project to make up my grade?

A. NO! If you can't master the basic material, how can you go beyond that? You need to do well in the material you're assigned; if a teacher gives one student an extra credit project, s/he should give everybody one. The point is to learn what you need to learn, not to grub for grades.

Professors relish students who are genuinely interested in the material, who ask intelligent questions, and who show an excitement for learning. Make an effort to get to know your professors, and to have them get to know you. They admire students who come for help, especially if the student is saying "I want to learn," not whining about grades.

If you do poorly on an exam, go over it with the professor and see where you made your mistakes. Learn from your mistakes--that's what mistakes are for! A good exam is not just something to give you a place in the class; it's a way to bring material together. Learn from it.

10) Preparing for other assignments. Turn in lab reports, papers, projects, etc. on time (unless there is a very, very, very good reason not to).

For papers and projects, don't put off beginning them. As soon as they are assigned, decide what you will do it on and begin the library or field research for it. If you are unfamiliar with how to do a literature search at the library, ask the librarian for help. College libraries today are equipped with computers so you can do very fast searches for references--learn how to use them. Remember, ignorance is curable--that's what school is for! Don't be embarrassed to say "I've never done this before--can you show me how to get started?"

If you've not written scientific papers, or papers for art history, or whatever the class the paper is for, ask the teacher the format s/he wants. Scientific papers can be very different from other areas, so make sure you know what the professor expects.

As you review material for a paper, keep very careful notes. Keep a separate sheet of paper or a big index card on each reference--write the full citation at the top (e.g. Clown, Bozo T. 1993. The effects of gravity on juggling. *Journal of Circus Science*, Vol. 49 (5): 343-345.) and then make notes on what I found that pertained to your topic. Then somewhere on that sheet/card make a very short summary, often in a different colored pen, so you remember quickly what was in that paper.

About 90% of writing papers is being organized, and getting an early start.

11) Where to study: Study in a quiet place where you won't be distracted. Never study with the TV on, and preferably not even the radio. The more distracted you are, the less you will learn and the longer it will take. The best place of all is the library.

12) How much to study. The rule in college is that you should study three hours out of class for every one hour in class to get a "C". For an "A", even more will probably be needed. This means you have to work very hard and set your priorities. In college, your number one priority is your classes, after that, your work-study job, and after that, time to relax a little, eat right, stay healthy and whole in mind and body.