

The Skills Students Need to Succeed in College—Part 2

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An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.

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More than likely, you've heard of the three R's in education—reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic. In my last article, I addressed the three R's by identifying them as some of the more common skills that students need to succeed in college; in my article, I referred to them as reading, writing, and thinking. Although students don't have to be proficient in mathematics in order to be "good" thinkers, the ability to properly set up and work through an advanced mathematical problem does provide an excellent model for the type of orderly and logical thinking that helps students succeed in every subject found in higher education. Even the more creative disciplines such as art, music, and theater require the ability to think in an orderly and logical fashion!

Believe it or not, there are other skills that students should have to succeed in college that are just as important as the three R's. In this article, I'll cover the skills of time management, communication, demonstrating responsibility, and applying knowledge.

It doesn't matter what type of student you are or what type of degree you are pursuing—Bachelor's, Master's, or Ph.D.—it is vital that you manage your time well. I vividly remember that during my first week of college, each of my five professors had assigned 200-300 pages of reading, three had assigned papers, and the other two were giving quizzes—and it was all due by the end of the second week! I thought, "Geez, what's wrong with these professors? Don't they know I have a ton of homework in each of my other classes?"

The truth was, the professors didn't care about the other classes; their only concern was what I needed to learn in their individual courses. I quickly learned that it didn't pay to fall behind.

Professors who are teaching multiple classes and hundreds of students each semester have too much to do to worry about whether one student completed a reading assignment or to wonder why an individual student's paper wasn't completed on time. College professors don't call you to see if you are doing your homework. If they see you at the movies or in a restaurant, they don't stop and ask if you completed your reading assignment before you went out with your friends. If you give them a lame excuse that they've probably heard a hundred times before, they don't take the time to verify the story about a sick relative, a homework-hungry pet, or a computer malfunction. More often than not, they'll just quietly enter a failing grade in their grade book and shake their heads. It's not that they

don't want you to succeed, they just assume that if you really want to learn—and ultimately to graduate—that you'll put in the effort it takes to succeed.

While I don't have the room here to give you a full class in time management, I can give you some common tips that college students have found helpful. First, get organized and stay organized. Keep careful track of all assignments and know when they are due. Be consistent about where and how you write down your assignments—*don't* use more than one calendar or filing system!

Next, know exactly what you have to do to get an assignment done. Read the instructions often and ask questions of the professor early; professors hate getting questions the day before the assignment is due.

Set up a to-do list, prioritize all your assignments, and budget *more than enough* time for each one; don't spend so much time on one that you forget the others! Leave plenty of time to get the assignment done so that once you've finished, you have enough time to check it for mistakes—if it's a paper, proofread it several times; if it's a project, make sure you didn't forget anything the professor required.

Be sure to prioritize your overall time by not procrastinating. If you want to watch your favorite show on television, consider taping it and watching it when you have more time. If your friends want you to go out with them, honestly ask yourself if you have time. Don't put off until tomorrow what should be done today.

Finally, when thinking about managing your time, consider the story of the ant and the grasshopper. As you probably remember, while the grasshopper played all summer, the ant was busy working—gathering food and firewood, as well as making repairs on his house. When winter came, the grasshopper was cold and hungry, but the ant was warm, safe, and well fed. Will you be the ant or the grasshopper when the assignment is due or when it's time for an exam?

The next two skills, communication and demonstrating responsibility, relate closely to one another and with time management. I know that as a professor, I appreciate and respect students who take the time to ask questions or ask for help when they need it. I'm referring to students who ask intelligent questions that help clarify assignments and my expectations rather than asking me to repeat information I gave during the class they skipped. I'm also referring to students who ask for help but demonstrate that they have made a genuine effort on an assignment rather than students who are trying to get an easy answer.

Similarly, students can demonstrate that they've taken responsibility for learning and want to be successful in a number of ways. First, they show up to every class and they are often there early. When these students are in

class, they are ready to learn; they've read the assignment and have given it some thought. Students also demonstrate responsibility and their ability to communicate by actively participating in group discussions during class, asking questions, and most importantly, being prepared to answer the professor's questions!

When responsible students know ahead of time that they are going to miss a class or when the unexpected comes up that forces them to miss a class, they contact the professor ahead of time to request information they will miss and to discuss make-up assignments. These students also get their assignments in when they are due regardless of whether or not they are going to be absent. I know that I'm much more likely to work with a student about an assignment due date if he/she has kept in close communication with me ahead of time!

I can't believe how many times college students fail to show even the most basic level of responsibility. These types of students often come to class without pens, pencils, paper, or even their books! Often they lose or don't complete their homework, they confuse or forget assignment dates, and sometimes they don't even bother studying for tests. They often beg for more time, make-up work, or special arrangements that no one else gets. However, I do have to say that students who *don't* demonstrate responsibility do excel at one thing—making excuses!

The last skill to be addressed in this article is applying knowledge. Although there are a number of points I could make on this topic, I want to make only one: learn from your mistakes. For example, one of the courses I've taught over the years required students to write a thesis paper. I learned years ago that just because a student is in college, doesn't mean that he/she can write well.

In the thesis courses I've taught, I've been required to teach a particular type of writing format, the skills of conducting research, and how to write a thesis paper. I wasn't required to teach spelling and grammar skills per se. However, because so many students lacked these skills, I spent the time creating numerous handouts and devoted several class periods teaching grammar. I also spent a great deal of time proofreading and editing my students' papers prior to when the papers were due in order to give the students specific help with the skills they were lacking.

It never ceased to amaze me how many students kept making the same mistakes no matter what resources I provided them or how many times I edited their papers. This occurred for several reasons. First, the students didn't use the resources that would have helped them become better writers. Secondly, the students didn't take the time to communicate with me to find out what they did wrong and to understand my editing marks. Third, the students didn't manage their time well enough to put in the level of effort required to write well. Finally, the students failed

to apply the knowledge that came from making mistakes; rather, they just kept making the same mistakes! By failing to demonstrate the more advanced skills of effective communication, being responsible, managing time, and applying knowledge, the students also failed to demonstrate the basic skills of reading, writing, and thinking.

One final thought, although homeschoolers may successfully employ a variety of curricula and teaching approaches ranging from very structured to almost no structure at all, the skills required to succeed in college remain relatively constant. Being aware of these skills enables homeschooling parents to develop lessons, activities, and experiences that will help prepare their children to be successful in higher education. Happy learning!

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