

# 33 *Secrets to Student Success*

*Getting Better Grades and Becoming a Better Learner*

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*Student success is better performance, mastery of skills and content, as well as learning effectively. It is more than earning good grades – it is about being a better learner. The following are 33 secrets that can enable students to obtain better grades, learn more from classes and schooling, as well as become better learners through life.*

- 1. Become your own teacher** – If you really want to become a better student and learner, you must take ownership of your learning. It is your responsibility to learn effectively, decide what you want to learn and decide the experience in which you can master it. In order to learn new ideas, concepts, or subjects – become your own teacher and teach it to yourself. Teachers, parents, mentors, classes and schools are all doors to knowledge – but you hold the key.
- 2. Find purpose in what you are studying** – Sometimes, we are all placed in a situation where we have to be there learning what we really don't want to learn. This could be a class to fulfill requirements or required for graduating. If you can find something that would add value to you, it can do wonders. Ask, "How can this help me?" Ask someone else with you on the journey, "How can this help us?" Even if you find something small, it can change your perspective and provide motivation to engage in the experience as a more active participant. Plus, if you are going to do it anyway, why not make it useful to you.
- 3. Acknowledge and appreciate your successes** – If you have developed and sustained positive habits of learning and high performance, you must celebrate them. Pat yourself on the shoulder and reward yourself with simple things often. The celebration should be when you accomplish something, but also when you do something small on your journey. Too often, we look for praise and acknowledgement from others. When we can appreciate ourselves and our own hard work, we can view other's recognition of our work as an extra bonus. A small celebration is good motivation to continue.
- 4. Reflect on and evaluate low performance** – Writing in a journal, typing into a note app, speaking into an audio recording or any method of reflection that you choose can do wonders. Think about and reflect on what happened, what you would do differently next

time, the different ways of reframing the situation and what you gained from the experience. The process will help in evaluating your experience and improve your actions in the future.

5. **Be honest with yourself** – Be critical of yourself if that is what is required. Discipline yourself if that would lead to positive change. Snapping a rubber band on your wrist is one approach. On the other end, be compassionate to yourself if that is what is required. Be easy and happy with yourself if you put in the hard work. John Wooden, great UCLA coach used to say, “Discipline yourself and others won’t need to.”
  
6. **Become self-aware of how you learn** – Ask yourself when have you retained what you have studied or forgotten it instantly? Ask yourself when have you enjoyed learning about something and when you despised it? See if you can discover any patterns. It may happen when you draw things or talk through them. It may happen when they are related to a particular subject matter or concept. It may depend on your mood or past relationship with the subject. Find the patterns that work for you and incorporate those methods into your future learning opportunities.
  
7. **Use proximity and be closer to the action** – Sit in the front, close to teacher and/or near students that enjoy the class. Simply being closer to the teacher, presentations, videos and close to the action can help your focus and spark more moments of interactions. Sitting in the back, keeps you furthest away from the action and puts all distractions happening to students in front of you. The simple act of choosing a better seat can do wonders for your attention and focus.
  
8. **Make learning your target, not the grade** – This is similar to focusing on the journey over the destination. If you focus on the journey of learning, your results will usually also come out on top. However, if you focus purely on the results, you may miss learning and understanding entirely. It is like getting an A in the class or on a test and not remembering anything after the class. Plus, if you worked hard and learned, you already got something good out of it.
  
9. **Add your own creativity and touch** – When it comes to projects or assignments, not only should you complete the work with excellence, but you should try to add your own personal touch to it. For example, if all the requirements for a project are met, additional effort on

making something more visually appealing or better in some way may appeal further to your teacher and parents. The touch may also make it memorable for you. The simple act can help you remember the material and also show others that you are doing your best.

- 10. Be bold and challenge yourself** – Ask a tough question to a teacher and share your opinion even if it's bold and different. Just remember to do it in a positive and a friendly way where it's clear that your intention is better understanding or learning, and not confrontation. The strong opinion and challenging question may become heated at first, but then will result in a deeper understanding of the concept, a new way of looking at things, or a better way of articulating the position.
- 11. Accept feedback like a gift** – If someone says something you do not like and it comes off harsh, ask yourself genuinely is there any truth in it? If yes, ask for more feedback, clarity and suggestions to improve. It will only help you get better. If you feel the feedback was not coming from a place of concern, then either share your feelings or say thank you without any defensiveness. Like a gift from someone you respect, accept it regardless of how useful and valuable it may be to you.
- 12. Love challenges** – When a teacher, class or student challenges you to do something outside of your comfort zone, take it on. Perhaps it may be taking on a tougher science project or writing a research paper for extra credit when writing scares you. Look at it like a challenge that will help you grow and learn even more. Anything outside of your comfort zone, may create anxiety at first, but it will also become a memorable learning experience and stretch you to become a stronger learner. If you can master your worst fears, everything else is just a piece of cake. This way of taking on a challenge is similar to Eleanor Roosevelt's saying, "Do one thing every day that scares you."
- 13. Create routines and habits of success** – Getting to class on time, taking notes in an effective way, sitting closer to the action, finishing the homework in time, limiting distractions from one's devices and many more. There are many habits that you can develop that can enable success or limit it. See if there is a habit that may be limiting your success and then try to create a habit that can replace that one. For example, if a person habitually complains about homework and delays doing it, replace that with not complaining about it until you tried doing it or completing the homework early.

**14. Develop your attention and focus** – There are many ways to develop our attention and ability to focus. We can be in class physically without mentally being there. We can read an entire chapter without really understanding any of it. If we are fully present in class, in studying, in reading or in working on our projects, then we can be more effective. The trick is to not feel bored and feel engaged. The other piece is to build your ability to focus like a muscle. Consider meditation, yoga, breathing exercises, playing a musical instrument, listening to certain nature sounds, taking a walk and any other ways of calming the mind. When your mind is not calm, focus comes hard. A simple trick – next time you feel disengaged or unable to pay attention in class, take a long deep breath. A deep breath brings attention immediately.

**15. Limit distractions** – We live in an age of distractions and they are just increasing exponentially. We have our devices of smart phones, tablets and laptops with notifications. We spend significant time on email, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, surfing the web, watching TV, playing video games, watching sports and many more. We have so much that we can do besides what really needs to get done. A simple way to limit your distractions is to turn them off for a short time while you concentrate. May be putting your phone on airplane mode, or being out of sight of your TV and games would work for you. You decide.

**16. Create an environment conducive for learning** – With the number of distractions that exist, creating an environment where you can do your homework, study or work on your projects effectively is essential. A desk with a comfortable chair, a bench outside, a study room with no distractions, or whatever works best for you. Remember the less the clutter, the more you can focus. Perhaps, if you need to think creatively for a project, then taking a walk to reflect on ideas may be a better environment for you, then sitting on a couch. However, some people may prefer sitting on a couch if more ideas come to them when they can focus. What works work you?

**17. Play the right music** – There is music that makes us dance, there is music that motivates us and there is music that helps us focus. Great music can make a routine and boring assignment a lot more entertaining. The wrong music can serve as a distraction from what you are trying to do. Pick the music that complements your task to make the most out of your time. Creating a playlist or pandora station for studying and homework may be helpful.

There is an app on iPhones called *Study* which plays sounds for a set amount of time to help focus while studying.

**18. Be persistent and determined** – To be a great student, it is important to be persistent and never give up. Many refer to this as grit or resilience, which is an individual's passion for a long-term goal. Show grit in your ability to master the content, write great papers that you are proud of or demonstrate excellence in courses even when it seems challenging. A student that is determined to excellence will find a way to be successful. Teachers appreciate students who care and are determined.

**19. Be prepared** – It is easy to say be prepared than to actually do it. For every class, we should bring what is needed for the class. More important than that, we should bring what would help us maximize our learning time in class. For example, a class may require you to bring only a book, paper and pen/pencil, however, if you have your own notebook and post it notes, then that will help you feel even more prepared and organized. Make it a practice to be fully prepared for each and every class. Write post its, make checklists, make notes on your smartphone or do something that will prepare you and do it daily for each class.

**20. Organize daily and write it down** – Organization is the key to keep up with all the things that we need to do. Whether you use a homework app, notes app, calendar, post it note or any other tool – use it to write down all the things that you need to do for every class. It should all be written in one place – the task, due date and what it is. Every day, we must organize what needs to be done. The more we can systemize our tasks, personalize them and improve them – the better. It may also be beneficial to write down other extra-curricular commitments to stay in sync and manage time.

**21. Make health a priority** – There are many healthy habits that affect learning such as eating breakfast, having a healthy lunch, drinking plenty of water, having healthy snacks, sleeping enough, power naps, exercising regularly and many more. It is important to make health a priority and form healthy habits as they strongly affect our brains ability to learn and perform. Finals time is a great example of when these habits become even more important, especially when you have back-to-back finals. Let's listen to our body, it will tell us what it needs and when we need it.

**22. Schedule your time appropriately** – Much of being a better student is about improving our time management skills. There is always stuff to do and usually not enough time to do it. Then again, there is so much time taken by distractions. As a student, how can you maximize your time to improve your learning and performance? Allocating time for the tasks can be helpful. We often make the mistake of using the shortest time required when scheduling time for tasks. The key is to use the average time required. So if the shortest time to do your math homework is 30 minutes and the longest time is usually one hour, then you should allocate the average time of 45 minutes. This way, we don't fall behind and have enough time to study and have fun.

**23. Prioritize** – Do what really matters, when it matters. Use class time and home time productively. There will always be something that gets added to what you need to do. Where does that fit into your schedule? Is it your top priority? Look at your schedule and see what would be the best for you and your priorities. Remember, you can delay something or shorten something, the key is to revise your schedule and be conscious of your top priorities. Your top priorities often are decided by upcoming tests or due dates for projects.

**24. Manage your time wisely** – Any task can take longer by a few minutes or a few hours. How much time you spend on something is in your hands. For example, if you have allocated 45 minutes for your math homework, set a timer. This will trigger your brain to try its best to finish within the allocated time. Remember, the timer is only to help you stay on track. Be willing to add more time if needed to do a better job. When it comes to more creative assignments, don't set your timer and just enjoy it.

**25. Pick organization tools that work for you** – There are more organizational tools released everyday than a person could possibly need. Remember, it is not about whether it is a notebook, post it notes, index cards or a fancy new app. It is about what works best for you. Try a few things out and see if you can find one that truly helps you, even if it's not what everyone else is using.

**26. Build positive relationships** – Having a friendly and positive relationship with the teacher can help significantly. The teacher may help you in something you are struggling with, give you a makeup assignment or share with you some insights about the subject matter that excites you. Teachers are human beings. They care for students and are there to help. This

also applies to peers that care about learning, as well as other school staff. You never know who may help you. The best way to build a positive relationship is to help the other person when they need help.

- 27. Say it with the teacher's perspective in mind** – It is important that when you speak to a teacher, school staff or principal that you first think about how it would affect them and make them feel. If it can help them in anyway, then share that. If it is something related to you or your grades, say it in a humble manner. If you have build a positive relationship with the teacher from the last tip, then this process is a lot easier. Remember, “how” you say can often be more powerful than “what” you say.
- 28. Reduce stress and find your ways to cope with it** – As students today, you have more stress than any other students in the past. With all the expectations around tests, classes, families, relationships and friends, it is easy to see why stress can be so high. How can we reduce stress? The answer is in what we do for fun and relaxation. Taking a few minutes to laugh from a video clip, listening to our favorite song and talking to our best friend can significantly lower our stress. Remember, studying while stressed or experiencing too much stress limits how much we can learn and produce. Finding rituals to cope with stress before finals or major assignments can make those times less stressful.
- 29. Test yourself and stretch your mind** – When studying for a big exam, challenge yourself harder than the teacher can challenge you. For example, come up with the hardest problem or question you can and then try to solve it. When we challenge ourselves in this way, we not only learn more, but we also feel ready to take on a challenge. If you try to stretch your mind just a little more in every concept with more research or a deeper question or application, you will surprise yourself with how much more you gain.
- 30. Involve your senses and memories into your learning** – Take notes in your own words about things that stand out. There are memories and experiences you have that can be attached to learning. The brain uses emotions as a filter, and therefore, linking emotions to concepts you are learning can be a powerful method of studying. For example, if trying to memorize a formula, come up with your own words for each letter. Make them funny, ridiculous and creative and you will never forget the formula.

**31. Use visuals** – Create mind maps or illustrate a concept that you are trying to understand.

Leonardo da Vinci and many other great thinkers found that illustrating the concepts enabled many connections to other ideas. Visuals help nurture creativity, think about something in a deeper way or remember something important. There are so many ways of creating visuals today – with apps or with a simple paper and pencil.

**32. Ask questions** – Being more inquisitive and curious in the subject matter can lead you to more learning. Ask questions to your teachers, classmates, parents or anyone else about a topic you wish to learn more about. Remember, there are no stupid questions. If you don't understand something, ask it; or if you want to learn more about something, ask it. If you would ask just one real question every day, it can have such a powerful effect.

**33. Work harder and smarter** – Putting in the hours, time and effort is a given for student success. Figuring out how you study best while putting in the time is even better. There is often a myth in school that smart people get good grades. This is simply untrue – the students who care to learn and put in the hard work are the ones who perform well. Do your best every time and seek to improve your learning practices and you will gain great success as a student.

### **Suggested Prompts for Using the 33 Secrets to Student Success**

- Highlight the secrets you practice in green, ones you sort of practice in yellow, and the one's you don't practice in red.
  - Pick at least one secret from the greens that you want to continue practicing because it works well for you, at least one secret from the yellows that you can improve on, and at least one secret from the reds that you want to try out to see if it works for you.
  
- Pick at least one secret that you think your parents could help you with and talk to them about it.
  
- Pick at least one secret that you and a friend can hold each other accountable for and practice together.
  
- Pick at least one secret a teacher can help you with and talk to the teacher about it.
  
- Pick one secret that you think is new and can be beneficial to you. Google it and come up with a plan to build it into your habits.