

Independent Learning Newsletter Tips

Top Tips to Encourage Students to Boost Their Academic Career in 2016

It's always a great time to re-prioritize and re-vamp your academic approach. The key to making the most of this opportunity is focusing on the things which will bring the biggest return. Consider prioritizing these three tips to get the most from your education in 2016.

1. Simplify Your Organization System

Every student has an organization system. True, the definition of "organization" may be looser for some students than others, but everyone has a way they stay organized (or attempt to).

Maybe you're the "Type-A" student and you have a clearly defined system. You'll know that you're "Type-A" by the file folders you both own and use, the folded socks in your drawer, and all the lists by which you keep track of important information. You probably have a calendar, a planner, and you know exactly which clothing is clean and which is dirty.

But not everyone fits in such a naturally organized world. These students can be called "Type-B."

If you're a "Type-B" student, you're not alone, but organization probably requires more effort. "Type-B" students tend to prefer "piling systems" to filing cabinets. Calendars often seem like too much work, so they'd rather just put everything in their backpacks and find it later. Students on the far end of the "Type-B" universe may even find themselves sorting laundry via the "smell check" method.

Regardless of whether you are a Type A or B student, though, one of the biggest difference-makers this year is your organization system. Few things will save time and improve academic performance the way an effective organization system will.

A great organization system has at its centre one goal: replace your brain.

The more organized you are, the less you have to think. Your organization system should be simple enough that you don't have to make any decisions about where you put new assignments, where to find completed assignments, or what to do with graded assignments. You shouldn't have to go through a mental checklist every time you study because your organization system does it for you.

The fewer decisions you need to make, the more your thoughts and energy can focus on things that matter. Thus the simpler your system, the better. Consider these four questions to determine how simple your organization system is right now:

- Do you have only one place for each category of assignments: not completed ("to-do"), completed ("to-turn-in"), and graded ("to-file")?
- Do you have only one place where you keep your notes for class?
- Do you have a system to make sure that all assignments get on your calendar?
- Do you have a system to focus on what needs to be done today and not just what's due tomorrow?

When you can answer each of these four questions without thinking, you'll know that your organization system is simple enough to be a major asset in 2016.

2. Break the “Cram Cycle” Before it Starts

By the end of the semester, students often find themselves overloaded and overwhelmed, having to rely on cramming for final exams to get through to the break. They are exhausted and in survival mode. Thriving academically no longer matters. All that matters is the break at the end.

If you’ve ever felt this way, you’ve experienced what we call the “Cram Cycle.” Students get busy during the semester, which leads to exhaustion. When you’re exhausted, the only thing you want to do is zone out for a bit. After an afternoon of zoning, students are forced to put all their effort into completing assignments that are due tomorrow. We call this “cramming.” As students work on only that which is due tomorrow, long-term assignments pile up and create even more busyness, which leads to exhaustion, and the “Cram Cycle” begins to accelerate.

Most students only get out of the “Cram Cycle” when the semester ends.

But 2016 can be different. If you want to stay out of this dreaded cycle, commit yourself to studying at least five days a week, even when you don’t have anything due the next day. Use every day as a review day, spreading out your study sessions for big tests and projects across multiple days instead of letting them pile up. This approach takes more effort initially to create these habits, but you’ll reap the benefits when you’re free of the “Cram Cycle” and the stress that follows it come finals season.

3. Supercharge Retention with Scientifically-verified Study Strategies

Everyone knows that taking notes is a good idea. Reading your textbooks seem like a great thing to do. And you’ve probably learned that it’s best to have a consistent place to study, one which is quiet, clean, and comfortable enough (but not TOO comfortable).

But one of the best things you can do in 2016 is focus your efforts on strategies that have been scientifically-verified to boost your retention.

For example, one of the best things you can do is to take a break in the middle of your study sessions. In one study psychologists wanted to find out whether there was any difference in “spacing” a study session (this means to take a break in the middle) or “massing” instead (which means that you hammer it out all at once).

The researchers took two randomly-chosen, equal groups of students, gave them the same amount of study time, gave them the same material, and tested them on the material afterward. The only difference was that one group took a short break in the middle and the other group didn’t. The results were incredible.

The group that studied with “spacing” did 50% better than the group that studied with “massing.” That means in the same amount of study time, you could potentially boost your retention by 50% by just taking a ten-minute break.

You can learn more about many other topics to help you achieve your best at school by going to the links section in your portal and opening the ELES handbook:

