HOW TO IMPROVE STUDY SKILLS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Middle school is recognized by most authorities as a crucial period in a student's life. You are at the point where schoolwork is becoming more difficult, and your grades are being counted on your official transcript. These factors alone are formidable, but classwork is also becoming more involved and abstract, and students are being asked to use their brains in ways analytical and intuitive that they may not have yet been called on to develop. Because this period in your life marks your passage into the adult world of practical knowledge, reasoning, and career study, it is important that you cultivate an effective method of learning and reviewing information that allows you to truly understand it. By acknowledging the following factors, you can develop the skills needed to absorb and apply information in class.

1. **Create an appropriate study environment.** Many students have a difficult time keeping up with their studies merely because they feel frustrated and uncomfortable when they sit down to begin them. In order to have an encouraging and fruitful experience when studying, you must be in an environment that allows for full concentration.The first thing that any student appreciates when studying is an open, organized studying surface, such as a large desk or table. A desk with drawers or some plastic tubs that can be stored near the table will allow you to have your resources close by. It is to be stressed that the study area be open--having the space to spread out books and papers will minimize frustration. Furthermore, a focused study environment requires quiet and no distractions. The usual "supplies" that are brought to the study area--a CD player, snack food, etc.--are discouraged. These things break concentration and take time away from studies. The student should know that study time is study time, and should eat before or after--not during--his work. Other factors that create a good study environment are good lighting and comfortable furniture.
2. **Develop a calm attitude.** Studying also requires the correct attitude. Be calm and patient with yourself as you review the material. Beating yourself up will do no good. Try to open your mind as much as possible by putting other things aside and dispelling frustration.
3. **Take good notes (and pay attention in class).** Class time is when much of learning takes place. Pay attention during class, and don't expect to learn everything later on your own. As a student moves through middle school and into high school, lectures will become more crucial to the grade and in-class participation will often count for points. Paying attention in class familiarizes you with the material, and taking notes firms it up until further studying solidifies it. Some good note-taking strategies are:
   * Using abbreviations or symbols for commonly

used words (e.g. mlcl for molecule, w/ for "with," the Greek letter delta for the concept of change).

* + Singling out the most important information for the record (main ideas, necessary details).
  + Using clear headers to organize information.
  + Drawing pictures or diagrams rather than expressing "visual concepts" in words.

1. **Develop effective memorization methods.** While memorization is far from being all you'll need in middle school and high school, it is often called into use. [MindTools](http://www.mindtools.com/memory.html) is a website which details many memory techniques. The following is a list of some common techniques to improve your memory:

* + List: When memorizing dates, formulae, etc., some find useful the most bare method of all--the list. When memorizing the scientific names of different organisms for a biology class, for instance, a student could create two columns side by side--one listing the common names, the other listing the scientific names. By reading the list over several times and then covering up pieces of information so that you are forced to remember them, you can teach your brain to associate the two names more quickly.
  + Flash cards: Flash cards are a valuable resource as well. They work much like a list, but instead of putting the corresponding information in two columns, you can use index cards (or paper, etc.) and put matching information on either side. For instance, borrowing the subject from the previous example, you could put "red fox" on one side, and "vulpes vulpes" on the other. You could then look at one side of the card and try to recall the information on the other side. This method is very similar to the list, but easier to quiz oneself with. It does, however, require more preparation (in creating the cards).
  + Acronyms/acrostics: Acronyms are valuable study methods in memorizing information as well. An example of a useful acronym would be the construction HOMES. Each of the letters in HOMES begins the name of one of the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, etc.) By remembering HOMES, it becomes easier to list all five lakes. An acrostic is similar to an acronym, but instead of creating a word one can create a sentence in which the first letters of all the words correspond with the first letters of the objects of memorization. For example, in the sentence "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally" the first letters correspond to "parenthesis, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction," which is the order of operations in solving mathematic equations. Acronyms and acrostics will do little to help you unless you are already familiar with the terms you are attempting to recall.

1. **Focus on the areas that need the most attention.** Many students feel that any time studying counts as real studying, but studying is less effective if you do not target the areas that need study. A student who receives A's in his chemistry course may enjoy studying chemistry (and can still benefit from it, of course!) but if he is receiving C's or D's in math or English, then it is more pressing during the grading period to study those other subjects. Assess your strengths and weaknesses and distribute your time accordingly.
2. **Work with others.** While distractions are bad in a study environment, studying in a group or pair can be very useful, as long as everyone involved is focused on studying. Study groups allow the student to use other students as a resource. This is especially useful when the teacher with the necessary information is not available. By working together, students can fill in the gaps for each other and identify with each other's problems in the learning process, a connection more difficult to make between teacher (who has understood the material for a long time) and student (who is just now being exposed to it). Study groups can also quiz each other, using flash cards or just verbal questions. It is also widely known that teaching someone else material that you are currently going over in class can help you to learn the material more concretely and smooth out the wrinkles in your understanding. If your knowledge of a subject is fairly good but could use improvement, consider tutoring or trying to teach someone else, so that you can cement your understanding or work through roadblocks together.
3. **Develop crucial essay writing skills *through practice*.** A commonly overlooked aspect of study is the student's ability to discuss a topic in depth, or to organize his thoughts in an essay. Essay writing is not something that can be learned overnight--the only way to develop it is to practice and receive criticism. Take advantage of study periods to write out the information that you know in essay form. This practice can help you to prepare for essay questions on a test or quiz and show you what you know and what you need to learn.

Developing effective study skills in middle school is a wise mode of preparation for high school and for the real world. As you move on through life, the study skills you've developed in middle school will be useful to you. Using your techniques, you can commit to memory important information that might someday impress your boss. You can receive and enact instructions given by a superior to the tee, thanks to a cultivated ability to pay attention during lectures and gather information as it is given. Use the time you have now, in middle school, to earn yourself great grades and to develop useful learning skills for the future.

**Quick Tips:**

* When working in groups, don't be distracted from your purpose--studying.
* The easiest thing to learn is the thing you're interested in. Take interest in what you're studying by seeking out the real-life applications.
* Take studying seriously, but don't dread it, or you'll stop. Focus on how important it is to you that you learn the material.