

Tips for Academic Success for Middle School Students

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Most academic problems that students encounter in middle school are rooted in just a few behaviors. Here are some things a middle school (or any level) student can think about if they're seeking to make improvements in their academic performance.

1. Pay Attention in Class

Teachers typically focus on relaying the key concepts that you need to know in order to progress to higher or deeper levels of understanding. If you're chatting in class, or reading books, or playing Tetris, or sleeping, or otherwise not focusing on your teacher when they are teaching, it's likely that you're missing really important information.

There is usually a very strong correlation between how well a student does on an assessment and the amount of eyeball time the student gives their teacher. Lips closed and eyes open is usually a productive strategy.

2. Ask Questions (Immediately)

If you don't understand something you should ask immediately. Often, one piece of information builds upon another, and if you don't understand one thing then you also won't understand the next. It's really important that you're making efforts to understand each topic as it comes along in the class instead of waiting until later. If you wait until later, you'll end up having many more things that you don't understand. It's a cumulative effect!

If you're not doing #1 (paying attention in class), however, then this point is mostly irrelevant because you won't even know when you *NEED* to ask questions; that is to say, if you're not paying attention in class, you aren't even going to know what you *SHOULD* be understanding in the first place. Start with #1.

3. Do Your Work to Learn (Not to just to finish it)

Good teachers don't assign homework as 'busy work'. Instead, they have designed homework that serves the purpose of reinforcing the key concepts and deepening understanding. If you rush through your homework just trying to 'get it done', then you're likely not thinking about questions, problems, etc. long enough to be gaining as much from it as you are intended. It's more important to really try your best on the work that you do complete, rather than just put things down that don't have much thought in an effort to be 'done'.

Mostly likely, student, if you really focus on the three items above, you'll set yourself on a path to academic success. However, if you still need more, read on....

4. Avoid Distraction at Home

The brain is typically very poor at focusing on two things at once. In reality, trying to focus on two things simultaneously results in poor memory of both things, and it usually takes more time to accomplish a task when you're distracted by another one.

- a. Turn off the _____(Netflix/YouTube/Television/etc.). Many students think that they can watch television and do their homework or study at the same time. This is a bad idea. Rather than trying to watch television while doing your work, give all of your attention to your work, and then give all of your attention to whatever it is you want to watch.
- b. Put your phone away. Messaging apps, TikTok, Instagram, etc. are constant distractions. Put your phone out of reach, out of sight, and out of hearing distance while you're doing your work. Once upon a time, people lived without any of these. You can do it for an hour at a time.

5. Do More than the Minimum

Teachers will assign various tasks that are intended to guide students through a learning process towards a particular goal. However, these tasks are usually aimed at the 'standard' level of understanding. If you want to do well, you should focus on doing more towards your learning than just what you've been asked. This means, spend just a little bit more time reading, writing, working new problems, viewing other resources, etc.

6. Don't Cram

The brain learns most effectively when smaller amounts of information are assimilated over long periods of time rather than large amounts over shorter periods. Rather than an hour studying the night before a test, it's better to spend 15 minutes a day for four days learning up to the test. The added advantage of this strategy is that if you realize that you don't understand something on day 1 of studying, you'll have time to ask questions! If you wait until the night before a test, you don't have time to get help and ask questions when they arise!

7. Organize and Schedule

This one is a tangent to #'s 5 and 6: Your ability to plan-ahead effectively and set appropriate goals (#6) partly depends on your ability to keep yourself organized, and know what needs to be done *at minimum* helps you to know what you should do to dig a little deeper (#5). Take time to sort out our folders (real and digital), create a calendar that works for you, to-do lists, etc. Take advantage of the digital tools that you have (Google Classroom, etc.) by looking at them regularly, and then set aside time to get the things done that you need to get done.

8. Pick Friends Wisely

It's important that you have friends that are encouraging you to be the best person that you can be. This includes in how you interact with other people, the types of activities you choose to pursue, and your study habits. If your friends don't take their learning seriously, then it's going to be hard for you to take it seriously, also.