10 STEPS TO

EARNING AWESOME

GRADES

(while [illegible])

THOMAS RYAN

Introduction

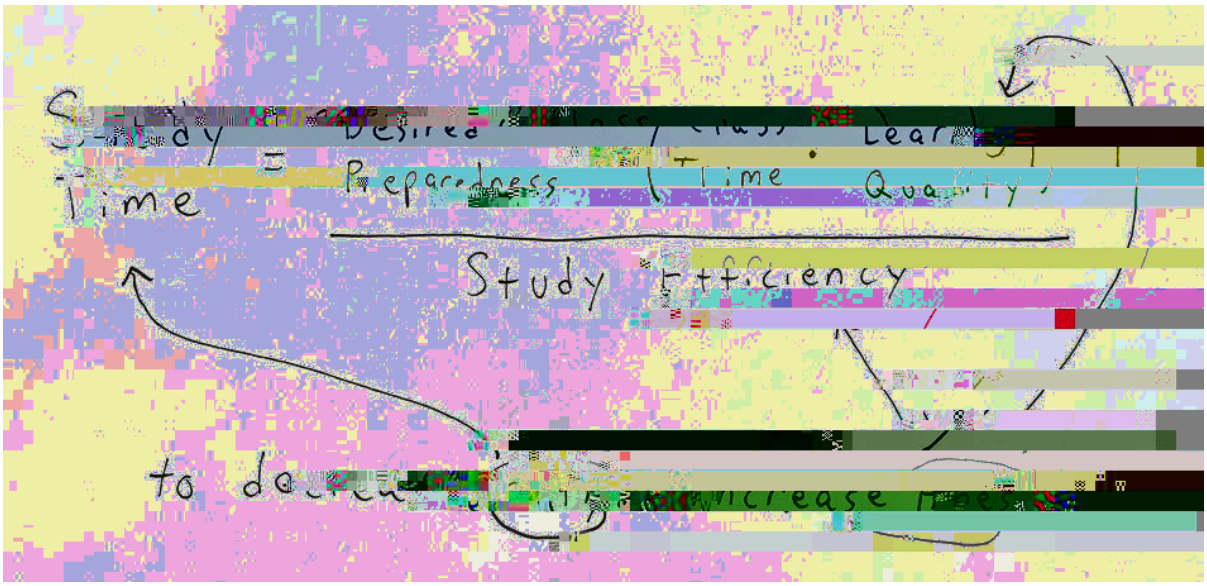
There is a goat icon on the cover of this book because putting it there made it easy to start this introduction. Also, goats are hilarious.

Moreover, goats are really smart, and they'd probably get damn good grades if they stopped yelling long enough to think about goat school.

2. Learning Quality
3. Study Time
4. Study Efficiency

Given those factors, here's the initial form of the equation:

Pretty simple, no? Now we just do some algebraic fiddling to solve for Study Time:



Assuming you're committed to attending all your classes, Class Time is fixed. It's a constant. If you've already set a goal for Desired Preparedness, that's fixed for now as well.

This means you've got two variables to work with: and . To decrease the amount of time you need to spend studying, increase either of them. Or be a baller and increase both.

Book Overview

The rest of this book is dedicated to giving you strategies and tactics to do just that. I've organized the book into , each of which covers a different skill area:

- Paying Better Attention in Class

Step 1 - Pay Better Attention in Class

Since your Class Time is a constant rather than a variable, I think it makes sense to prioritize Learning Quality first. The more you can learn while you're part of your professor's captive audience, the less work your Study Efficiency will have to do later when you'd rather be hanging with friends and playing *Fibbage* (the best party game ever, I might add)

The first step to upgrading your learning quality is deceptively simple:

.

This is one of those "easier said than done" pieces of advice; semesters are long and classes constantly wage a war of attrition against your motivation levels. These strategies will help you weather the storm.

Don't Overload The System

I had a professor in my MIS program who was quite the character. In addition to praising "the Google" at least twice a week and sending students on extra-credit missions that involved photographing Cabbage Patch kids in weird locations - like Intel's chip manufacturing facility - he'd also end every class by saying,

> *"Don't overload the system!"*

The system he was referring to is your brain, but I'm going to take it a step further and define the system as your body.

This isn't a huge stretch, actually; Elliot Hulse, a strongman/fitness personality with over 1 million subscribers on YouTube, has a key philosophy that

.

Your mind does all the work involved in earning awesome grades, and the performance of that mind is dependent on the state of your body. As Elliot's YouTube intro video eloquently puts it:

> *"The most important part of the game is your game piece!"*

I go to the bookstore and look at the college prep section a lot (it's an upgraded version of a motivational technique called *visualization*) since I want to see my work there some day. Almost every college success book I thumb through mentions health somewhere…

…but it still bears repeating. Why?

The truth is that most of us are like the kid who goes to karate class and wants to learn flying tornado kicks before mastering proper balance. We want little tricks, hacks, and tactics that promise to make our lives better.

However, all the little mind hacks and study tricks in the world won't help you if you're constantly suffering from bad health due to poor nutrition, lack of sleep, and inadequate exercise.

Picture two ninjas: One keeps his body in top form and practices every day, but his master's a hard-ass and only lets him fight with his bare hands.

The other actually isn't a ninja at all - he's just an unhealthy anime addict yelling quotes from Naruto and holding a $5,000 katana bought for him by his rich dad.

Who's going to win that fight?

All this is an elaborate way of trying to convince you to make your health . Be deliberate about:

1. Eating healthy 90% of the time
2. Working out regularly - this can be fun exercise; join an intramural sport or get addicted to DDR like me!
3. Getting enough sleep - at least 6 hours a night

If you want to learn how to do these things properly, check out my friend Steve Kamb's site Nerd Fitness. There's an article there called *A College Guide to Eating Healthy* that might be a good place to start.

Sit Up Front and Be Present

Tap. Tap tap tap.

I woke up from my pleasant nap at the back of the huge lecture hall to find a really attractive girl tapping on my shoulder. "Maybe she'll be down to play Crash Team Racing with me, " says my brain.

Then she hands me a Red Bull.

Likewise, a mindful student plans for the next day each night, and thinks about what needs to be in her bag for that day. She makes sure her laptop is charged if it needs to be, and checks to see that the right notebooks are in her bag. She makes sure any files she needs are in Dropbox instead of sitting on her desktop, unable to be accessed.

If you find that you're not as mindful as you'd like to be, an easy solution is to create a reminder, such as:

- A note by your door or on your desk
- A recurring daily task in your to-do app
- An alarm on your phone

Anything that can trigger your mindfulness habit will work; eventually, you'll start anticipating it, and later you won't even need it.

Get Help from Your Professor (The Right Way)

Your professors want (in most cases) to help you, so you should definitely take advantage of their office hours if you ever have problems understanding the material in a class.

Not only will you get the help you need, but you'll also start building a relationship with that professor. This can be incredibly useful down the line, in addition to just being a generally cool thing to do.

When it comes to getting academic help, however, you should use the . Dale Corson, the 8th dean of Cornell University (the birthplace of the famous Cornell note-taking system), once remarked that students in engineering and science programs often have to work through a complex idea one sentence at a time in order to "crack" it.

If comprehension doesn't come even at this granular level of study, it's time to ask the professor for help. However, Corson advises,

Rather, when you go for help, you should be able to show the professor all that you do understand up to an exact point – and even show what you understand afterwards.

By doing this, you show the professor that you've really wrestled with the problem. Doing this has several benefits:

- You save the professor's time and help them understand the exact context of your problem
- The professor knows that you actually give a damn and will have a much better impression of you
- By really going to intellectual combat on the problem, you very well might solve it yourself before you need to ask

A programmer named Matt Ringel wrote a blog post a while back about an unwritten law at his company called the This is very similar to the Corson Technique, and gives some more specific guidance on how to act when you're stuck on a tough problem:

1. When you get stuck, push yourself to solve the problem for *15 more minutes.*
2. During that 15 minutes, document everything you do, keeping in mind that someone else will need those details if they're going to help you.
3. After that time, if you're still stuck, you must ask for help.

This rule is summed up in the mantra:

> *"First you must try; then you must ask."*

If you dig into some of articles on College Info Geek (my website), you'll notice that I often talk about the importance of becoming a . To me, this is someone who knows how and where to search for answers to tough problems - and, more importantly, is *willing to do it*.

Becoming a Solution Finder will help you immensely in your college career; it'll build habits that'll enable you to find answers and solve problems that other people can't. However, there's a balance to be struck; eventually, you should be willing to seek the help of your professors when you've exhausted your other options.

Keep Those Hands Moving

This last tip stems from an observation I made early on in college: Being an is almost always better than being a

We're more easily able to remember things that we actively participated in than things we were merely exposed to. When it comes to lecture-style classes, the best ways to be active are to speak up in class discussions and to

.

Going back to my Statistics class - because I was constantly taking notes, my attention was almost always focused on the professor and the material. In other classes, my commitment to taking notes wasn't as strong, and as a result, I'd often find my attention directed to less useful things like reading old BOFH stories.

Forcing yourself to take notes can be hard, though - so you've got to turn it into a habit. To do that, you could:

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Step 2 - Take More Effective Notes

Your notes are your method of taking the information that you're exposed to and recording it in a form that makes sense to you. When you do this, you learn more effectively. Also, you keep margins nearby for spontaneous drawings of those weird "S" things - or elaborately drawn out Mario levels if you're me.

In this step, I'll teach you what I know about taking notes - notes that focus on *learning* rather than simply recording, that cut down on the processing you have to do after class, and that enable you to study more efficiently.

Five Excellent Note-Taking Methods

There are many ways of taking notes, one of which is dipping your entire head in ink and slamming it on your notebook, then making mental associations between what you're learning in class and specific features of the resulting picture, which probably looks like a rejected Rorschach test card at this point.

Unfortunately, the subsequent amnesia makes this a less-than-stellar method. I know you're dying to test it for yourself, but trust me - use one of these five systems instead.

Note: Ebooks aren't a good format for images, but you can find visual examples of all of these in my video on note-taking systems.

Aside

what I read. When I do this the Outline Method is my system of choice.

While some of the other methods I'll be going over offer certain benefits for learning, I find that this method is perfect for recording a concise picture of the

what's presented in lecture. It's *very* difficult to become a mindless copying

then you can save a lot of time by simply adding personal notes and references on top of it instead of going through the effort of writing your notes from scratch.

One nice feature of this "system" is that it gives you something similar to a of the lecture. Since the slides are usually presented in a linear fashion, you can use your slide-notes as a way to jog your memory about things that were said at a specific point in a past lecture. It's quite similar to SoundCloud, which is a hosting service for audio files that lets you leave comments at specific points on a track.

There isn't much more to say about this method; however, I will mention that it's important to remain vigilant about truly learning the material and putting ideas in your own terms. The few times I've used the method in my classes, I found I was much lazier about creating a thorough picture of the material.

Paper Notebooks vs. Laptops

Besides your note-taking system itself, another choice you have to make when taking notes is whether to use plain old paper or a computer. Each method has its benefits and drawbacks.

Taking notes on your computer will typically be much faster than writing them out by hand, and you won't have to deal with hand cramps. Paper, however, is much better for drawing diagrams and pictures - and for math notes, it's the clear winner.

When you're taking notes and a new idea is presented in class, it has to pass through your ears or eyes, and then go through your brain for processing before it ends up in your notes.

When that idea hits your brain, that grey goo up in your skull pays attention to two things:

- the auditory sounds or printed letters/symbols that make up the message
- the actual "meat" of the idea, and how it connects to other ideas

Say, for example, that your professor puts up on the board the sentence, "Megatron is a Decepticon." She tells you this because she is awesome and for

material - and leaving out extraneous details that only waste your time.

Step 3 - Get More Out of Your Textbooks

Reading books is probably one of my favorite things ever, but when reading is assigned… I'm less than enthusiastic about it. Maybe you're the same. Still, a lot of the information you'll need to earn great grades is locked inside required textbooks, so you'll need to read them eventually.

Professors tend to assign *too much* reading, though; you usually don't need to pay super-close attention to everything you're assigned to learn the necessary information to ace your tests.

This chapter will show you how to figure out which reading assignments are actually worth doing, and it'll also guide you through the best strategies for completing those readings quickly and retaining as much important information from them as possible.

Don't Do All Your Assigned Reading

Here's the thing about assigned reading: . And you probably shouldn't.

Most classes assign way too much reading, and for many classes the reading isn't even useful to do for one of two reasons:

1. The professor will cover the same material in class, or…
2. You won't ever be tested on it

While the material in those textbooks is objectively *useful*, remember the theme of this book - reducing your study time! Your time in college is extremely limited, especially if you're making good use of it by working on projects, building relationships, staying involved in clubs, etc. Oh, and maybe a bit of time to actually relax as well.

Put simply, if your reading assignments aren't absolutely necessary to do, you shouldn't allow yourself the time to do all of them. That time can be better used elsewhere.

But how do you figure out which assignments are necessary, and which ones aren't? The first piece of advice I can give you is this: Readings can be separated into :

1. Primary readings
2. Secondary readings

Primary readings generally include the required textbook for the class and possibly other readings based on what you're learning. In general, you should make your best effort to do these readings.

Secondary readings are things like smaller books, articles the professor wants you to read, case studies, etc. In my experience, large portions of my grade never hinged on these types of readings, so they were prime candidates for either quick scanning or skipping altogether.

The other thing I'll say is to constantly . Be mindful of how much overlap there is between what's presented in class and what's in the textbook. Pay attention to how much of your exams actually focus on things you could only get from the reading.

By doing this, you'll be able to intelligently adjust your workload to fit your grade goal as the semester goes on without wasting too much time on reading.

Know How You'll Be Assessed

Gauging your classes isn't just useful for figuring out which reading assignments you can skip; it also helps you figure out *how* you should tackle individual reading assignments.

from your textbook readings. To account for this, you should make sure you focus on bolded terms, definitions, and any specific details that stick out when you're reading. Your reading notes should reflect this as well, and you should later convert them into rapid-fire questions that you can use to quiz yourself.

On the other hand, essays require you to have a firm grasp of the of a reading, and you need to be able to summarize it and build off of it in your own words. To prepare for this, it's better to practice honing in on the *most salient points* of a reading and try to summarize them once you've finished reading.

Don't Read Textbooks Like Newspapers

People generally read newspapers passively, and they do it just to get the gist of the day's events. If you were to ask someone about specific details they'd read in a newspaper the day after they'd read it, you probably wouldn't get good answers in response.

When you read your textbooks, you're reading to and the information. You're not just trying to get the gist.

That's why you should do your best to *not* read your textbook like you'd read a newspaper. I call students who do this - they're single-mindedly concerned with running their eyes over the assigned pages and then shuffling off to their next planned activity (possibly eating brains?).

Think of your textbook like an art museum. When I went to New York City last summer, I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art and walked through almost every exhibit.

While I do remember that the Met is the most amazing art museum I've ever been to, I don't really remember the details of the pieces I looked at. That's because I just casually strolled through the halls and looked at the art - I didn't take much time to note down the names of the paintings or who painted them.

Just like passively walking through a museum won't give you a detailed knowledge of the art in it, passively running your eyes over the words in a textbook won't help you really learn the material. And trying to re-read it multiple times won't yield much of an improvement either.

> *"How often you read something is immaterial; how you read it is crucial." - Virginia Voeks*

Instead of reading passively, read as if you were having a conversation with an intelligent friend. When she talks, you listen intently. When she pauses, you

contribute your own ideas and, together, you create new information. You come away feeling energized, not drained.

This type of reading is called

The longer a reading assignments is, the more likely a large portion of its

- the practice of forcing your brain to actually retrieve information instead of just passively exposing yourself to it. Doing this helps you learn much more efficiently.

An easy way to prep for Active Recall-based study sessions is to while you do your reading assignments. You should definitely take notes when you read - either during or immediately afterward - and a great way to process these notes for easy studying is to pull details from them and rework them into questions you can quiz yourself on later.

In addition to the details from your notes, another great source of questions is the *section headings* of your actual readings. These generally pull out the main idea of a section, so using them as a basis for a question is a good way to jog your memory of that section's most salient points.

Text in your reading assignments that's , *italicized*, or

- sitting nicely
- in lists

…should be given special attention. If text has special formatting, it's a good sign that it represents a main idea, vocab term, or important process that you should learn.

When I took my marketing class, I actually got to the point where I'd just scan through each textbook chapter looking for bolded vocab terms and write them down in my notes. I had figured out that the tests were largely based on these vocab terms along with a few case studies, so I had no need to waste time on all the other details in each chapter of the book.

Lastly, find a way to make reading a more interactive process by either marking up your books or taking notes on what you're reading. Both of these techniques emphasize active reading over simple, passive exposure, and both will make your later study sessions easier.

If you're renting your textbooks, plan to sell them, or otherwise can't permanently mark them up, you can use sticky flags instead to mark important points in your assignments. These can stick out of your book slightly and give you easy access to places you've marked, even when your book is closed.

If you *can* mark up your books, then you can either use a highlighter or a pencil to make permanent markings. I'm generally not a fan of highlighting; as a sort-of

OCD person, I always found myself spending too much time trying to make my highlighted lines nice and straight. For me, using a pencil works so much better.

Not only can you easily underline and bracket important terms, but you can also write short notes in the margins of your book. Remember why Harry Potter's Potions book was so useful in *The Half-Blood Prince?* Margin-notes can really help jog your memory later because they help you connect the reading material to things you already know, making it easier for your brain to solidify your understanding of the topic.

Speaking of notes, one last way to get more interactive with your readings is to take actual notes on them - in a separate notebook or on your computer. This is where can come in handy; you can turn your section headings into questions in your notes, then jot down details from those sections with a goal of answering those questions.

For most books, my preferred method of taking notes is to worry about them *after* I've finished a reading section. I'll typically read a chapter of a book I'm going through once, then open Evernote and create outline-style notes of all the details I remember (I'm trying to use Active Recall during this part to maximize my learning). This is what I'm currently doing as I go through *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg.

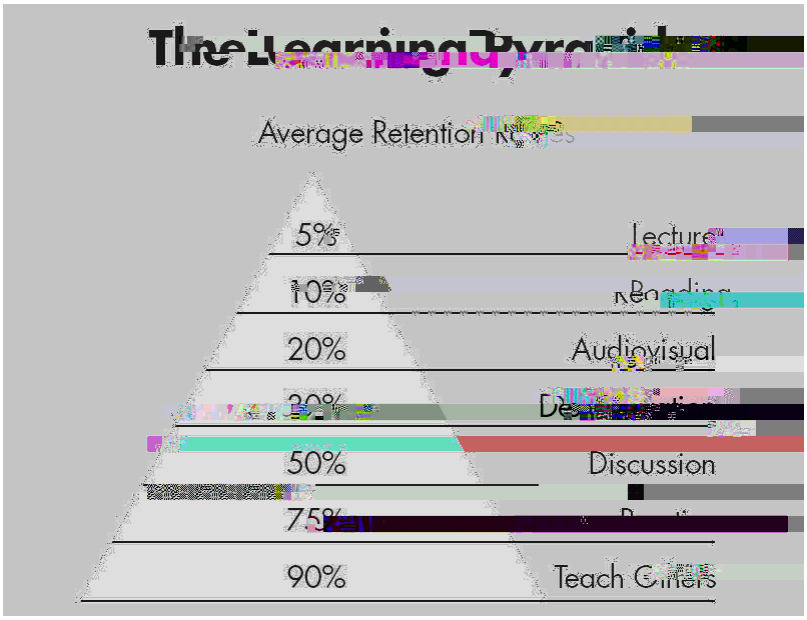
Once those details are down, I'll scan through the chapter once more and add anything else I deem important to the notes.

However, when I'm digging through textbooks while trying to find *specific information* - for example, when I'm researching a topic for a new video - I'll have a notebook open while I'm reading and will be jotting down flow-style notes as I go through the book.

Summarize What You Read

I want to put special emphasis on summarizing, as it's about the most useful implementation of an Active Recall strategy you can apply to your reading assignments. When you attempt to summarize what you've read, you're digging into your brain and pulling out the information for, essentially, the task of *teaching* what you read.

You may have heard of the *Learning Pyramid* before:



Now, many experts disagree about the accuracy and validity of the learning pyramid, and I wouldn't venture to claim that the percentages listed on it are completely accurate. There are a ton of factors that go into how well you can retain information, not least of which is the actual nature of the information itself - our brains are weird and built upon millions of years of odd, non-logical evolution, so the way they remember facts about math won't be the same they remember facts about the ninja creeping up behind you.

Still, both sense and my own experience tell me that the *bottom* of the pyramid is more or less right - something results in higher retention in your own brain. This is because you're intensely processing the information with a goal of being able to communicate it in a form that will be understandable to someone less knowledgeable than you.

Summarizing does this really well, so it's a perfect strategy for efficiently learning the most important material from your readings. As I noted above, I tried to summarize what I learned from each chapter in *The Power of Habit* by trying to type out bulleted notes from memory before going back through the chapter and fleshing them out.

You can do this as well, though if the reading you're doing is for a class that'll be assessing you with

Step 4 - Plan Like a General

As a student, your goal should be to never have to say,

> *"Holy banana pancakes, I totally forgot about that assignment."*

College life is a complicated maelstrom of activities, assignments, projects, events, and spontaneous trips to the grocery store at 2 A.M. so you can score free boxes to make cardboard battle armor out of.

Without a good planning system, things fall through the cracks. This chapter is all about helping you form that planning system and build the habits that'll keep it running smoothly.

It's also about helping you be more productive, and here's why…

Planning Mode vs. Robot Mode

As a student, you're not often forced to do specific things at specific times. You have a lot of choice in any given moment.

Jorgen von Strangle, the toughest fairy in the universe, is not standing behind you in preparation to put his boot up your rear every time you have to study. And that's a pity, because it's often *exactly what you need*. Your freedom of is one of the most devious culprits in the sabotage of your productivity.

Sheena Iyengar, a professor at Columbia Business School, has done a lot of research into the topic of choice. Here's a quote from her that summarizes a lot of her work:

> *"There are times when the presence of more choices can make us choose things that are not good for us. For me, the clearest example is that*

the more retirement fund options a person has, the less likely they are to save for their old age."

With a bit of thought, this actually makes quite a bit of sense. A lot of people never start investing because they feel there are *just too many options*, and

Note: Want to download this template to use as a guide for your own graduation plan? It's available right in the subscriber toolbox where you downloaded this book.

To do this, I spent a few hours going over all the requirements sheets relevant to my major - the core MIS curriculum, general business requirements, electives

- Homework
- Exam studying
- Group project work

and you'll also have non-academic tasks. Examples:

- Getting your resume reviewed
- Writing a cover letter for a job
- Setting up a meeting with your advisor
- Buying a new notebook from the bookstore
- Filling out your FAFSA
- Hitting the gym (Do you even lift?)

In addition, you'll probably have events with specific start and end times beyond your classes. Job shifts, group meetings, etc - make sure these are all on your calendar.

Now that you know all that you need to get done during the week, you can move onto the next step of planning - grouping your tasks by .

Understand Task Contexts

When it comes to managing your work, there are only two contexts that you need to concern yourself with:

- High thought-intensity work
- Low thought-intensity work

Work that requi-2djmyourbeyond r41 414 Tm 6ne[(be ET) Tj ETQ 1 (as1 c 0 -13G

more valuable to you in the long run.

Another thing to note here: When planning, try to review your past performance at certain times of the day. Do you do your best work in the early morning? Late at night? Right after class ends?

When you know yourself, you can plan for . If you know you're focused in the early morning, you can choose to schedule your class, work, and social engagements later in the day. You can also take care of your batched low-intensity tasks later on as well, leaving the early mornings open for even more focused work.

Create a Daily Plan

Planning your week out on Sunday (or whatever day you choose) gives you a

items on it, and the reason for that is because I am a heartless, soulless robot who works pretty much all the time.

…ok, it's not *that*

he wanted to know when students thought it was 50% probable they'd have their projects done, and also when they'd up that to 75% and 99%.

The results?

- 13% finished their work by the time they were 50% sure about
- 19% finished at their 75% probability estimates
- 45% finished before the time they were 99% sure they'd be done at

That last one is the most interesting - *less than half* of the students finished their work in the time they were it would take. They tried to make an extremely conservative estimate, and most were still wrong.
Another psychologist named Ian Newby-Clark discovered the root of the problem in his own studies. He asked research participants for time estimates based on both:

- Realistic, "best guess" cases
- Hopeful, everything-goes-right "best case" scenarios

As it turns out, people's estimates in both cases were virtually identical. The key finding here: When people try to come up with a realistic, "best guess" time estimate, their brains actually consider the . We are *very bad* at taking unpredictable setbacks and delays into account when making time estimates.

There's actually a good way of accounting for this problem (unlike many other cognitive biases), and that's to base your prediction on a broad view of the task, rather than all the individual components.

When you do this, you can compare it to similar tasks that have already been completed in the real world, and make your estimate based on the amount of time those tasks actually took. As you do more and more work, you'll have more and more data to pull from when doing this.

However, there's another effective trick you can use in making time estimates called the . This term was coined by the personal development blogger Steve Pavlina, but it harkens back to a concept thought up by Douglas Hofstadter, the author of what is potentially the most daunting book on my shelf, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*.

, aptly named, states:

"It always takes longer than you expect, even when

develop computers that could become world chess champions (the book was written in 1979), but it applies to a lot of the projects we humans take on.

Pavlina's Fudge Ratio acknowledges the Planning Fallacy and offers up a simple process for fixing it:

1. Write down a list of tasks you need to do.
2. Put an "off-the-cuff" time estimate on each one.
3. As you finish tasks, write down the actual amount of time they took.
4. Divide the actual task time by your estimate to get your Fudge Ratio.

So, for example, say you estimated that it would take you 45 minutes to finish a study guide for your history class. In reality, it takes you 1 hour and 15 minutes. Using math that I learned in 3rd grade when I wasn't thinking about Batman, I can calculate the ratio:

75 minutes/45 minutes = 1.67

Now you know your Fudge Ratio is - which means that the next time you need to predict how long it'll take you to finish a similar task, you should multiply your initial prediction by 1.67.

Over time, you won't need to do the math anymore; you just get better at

notes
- Work through problem set

I call this the , because I like superheroes and shaky metaphors.

Captain America was able to break a large-scale alien invasion down into components and direct his resources (the Avengers) to each portion; similarly, you should be able to break up your tasks and devote your resources (blocks of time) to each step.

Here's a couple of examples from my own work:

I get a lot of email, and I normally try to stay on top of it. Between questions from readers, partnership opportunities, old web design clients, and everything else, I probably get 20–30 emails that every day.

During the early fall of 2014, I spent quite a bit of time traveling to conferences and other events. As a result, the emails piled up to levels that weren't easy to clear out in a day – so I just neglected them entirely. My negligence eventually culminated in an inbox that held 97 unanswered emails.

Since I delete everything that isn't important every day, each of these emails that remained in the inbox required some sort of action – essentially leaving me with a 97-item to-do list.

Day after day, I'd tell myself:

> *"Today the day I'll answer them all!"*

I call this the Hulk method, as I was simply trying to the task. It didn't work; day after day, I'd try to tackle my inbox, realize how big the task was, and inevitably go do something else.

Then, one day, I decided to draw out a specific plan detailing exactly *how* I'd tackle my emails. I categorized each message, then created steps based on which messages were of the highest priority. Then, I forced myself to go through my inbox in the exact order the steps dictated.

Doing this worked - I finished answering all 97 emails . This is the day I came up with the Captain America method, because it was what I was doing: breaking down my task and planning out how I'd devote my resources to it.

It was about a month into the semester when my friend Alex told me about a new conference going on in Austin, Texas called FU Weekend. The entire point of the conference was to get a bunch of people together who all had creative projects that just weren't getting finished - and to . There was an application process, and the organizers were selective in order to keep the conference limited to people who would actually show up and do work.

surface, as there are a ton of different varieties of music and "music" you can study with:

- Music with vocals
- Purely instrumental music
- Ambient noise
- White noise (or pink/brown noise)

The type of music I prefer depends on the type of work I'm doing. If I'm going through a process, such as creating graphics for a post (something I've done countless times), I can listen to anything. It might be metalcore, it might be rap, or it might be weird remixes of anime theme songs. Basically, whatever boosts my energy levels is good. This goes for purely logical tasks as well, such as programming. Even if I'm writing code I haven't had to write before, I can put on any kind of music and be fine.

When it comes to writing, reading, or studying, it's a different story. At that point, I need music that's 99% instrumental, and it needs to be somewhat calm. I can recommend several artists if you're looking to expand your selections:

- 65daysofstatic - electronic-influenced post-rock
- Jordan Tice - instrumental bluegrass
- Pretty Lights - chill electronic
- Balmorhea - post-rock

…and if I don't stop myself, I could probably fill another book with recommendations (I like curating music).

Actually, a lot of my favorite study music picks are individual tracks off of albums that wouldn't otherwise be fit for studying; for example, many metal bands have one or two instrumental tracks or interludes in the middle of their albums.

Additionally, you'll find plenty of great study music in the soundtracks of movies, video games, and anime. There's also a thriving online community for a PC game called Touhou, and within it you'll find hundreds of fan-made songs - many of which are piano-only or otherwise fit for studying.

If you're looking for a good place to find great new study music, I've been working on a YouTube playlist for the last year called _____ _____ ___ ___. As of this writing, it's got 151 songs of all different genres. I always put

you'll do fine, bro - don't worry about it!"

Honestly, the best thing you can do in this situation is to:

- Build up a strong tolerance for saying no to fun things
- Make it difficult for them to contact you

You can close your door or find a secret study spot to avoid them physically, but you've also got electronic communication to worry about. I'll deal with that in the next section, along with other technology-based distractions.

Limiting Technology-Based Distractions

When it comes to technology, probably the worst distraction you face is the vastness of the internet. The best way to prevent yourself from wasting time online is to block your access to the places where you waste it. Plain and simple.

While blocking specific sites won't prevent you from finding new ones to waste time at, it's still effective. The idea is to make procrastination more effort than it's worth.

than most people will need, but desperate times sometimes call for desperate measures.

Seriously, you don't need to be notified whenever you get an email or Facebook message - you can easily check those later on.

Another thing you might try doing is putting your phone on Do Not Disturb mode. On the iPhone, this mode prevents calls, texts, and notifications from making any noise. I often use it when I really need to focus.

The main thing you should pay attention to here is my “College” folder, which I’ve drilled into a bit more so you can see how it’s organized. My method to organizing the madness that is college goes like this:

- School year (I moved my Freshman folder to long-term storage to save space at one point)
- Class (all non-project files for each class go here)
- Specific project folders

I’ve also got a Clubs folder for things pertaining to clubs and organizations, as well as an Admissions folder that holds copies of admissions documents and the like.

Once you’ve got a structure like this, you simply have to keep it organized, save things in the right place, and be disciplined enough not to deviate from it when creating new folders. Organization FTW!

Build a Quick Capture System

- A person you'd like to get to know

Most of these things are not ideas themselves, but your mind holds ideas of them – and that's the problem. Even though your brain is essentially a giant parallel

other people on Earth. Why? Ok, maybe it's not all that crazy - but I do have a tool that I refer to as my "second brain," and it's called Evernote.

Evernote is, at a glance, a simple note-taking app. However, there are reasons it

When I was a student, I was able to pull up my notes right on my phone while waiting for exams so I could quickly review. Evernote has also saved my butt on more than a few occasions; getting into the habit of saving anything I think I might need later in it has really paid off.

If you're going to take lecture notes on a computer, I highly recommend doing it in Evernote. Even if you take them on paper, you can choose to photograph them and import them into Evernote notebooks later if you'd like to make them searchable or accessible from anywhere.

Use a Task Manager

In Step 4, I talked about how you should plan your week out on Sundays. Well, there's a prerequisite to being able to do that effectively - and that's to make sure you have a system that captures tasks you need to complete.

You probably already knew this, so at this point you're asking:

"What's the best to-do app out there?"

I'm gonna make like a smarmy politician and give you an answer that sort of dodges the question:

Dodgy, yes… *but it's true.* I went through four years of college constantly reading app review blogs, looking for the absolute best task manager. I figured there must be one to rule them all. What I've learned now, though, is that we're

This "entropy" increases friction, makes it harder for you to see what needs to be done, and generally slows you down. Trying to work within messy, high-entropy systems is the equivalent to trying to run through a field of waist-high molasses.

That's why you must Use your Sunday planning sessions not only to create an overall plan for the week, but to keep your task management and file organization systems well-organized. Run through a regular checklist:

- If you've saved files to your desktop in a hurry, move them to where they belong
- Organize Evernote documents if you've sent raw ones from Drafts or entered them hurriedly into a default notebook
- Finish, delete, or re-schedule tasks that are left in your task management system
- Keep your backpack and room organized

Remember, having to deal with friction will reduce your motivation to study, especially as the semester wears on and life gets generally more complex. Constant vigilance!

Step 7 - Defeat Procrastination

I… procrastinated on this chapter. It's actually one of the last chapters I wrote for this book, even though the topic is one I'm quite knowledgeable and passionate about.

Why? Oh, mostly - since I've done a lot of work on procrastination (blog posts, podcasts, videos, coaching), I felt like this chapter needed to be the most well-written, smooth, info-packed one in the book.

So I left it sitting while I wrote the rest of chapters in relative perfectionism-less bliss. Now, this is somewhat ok, as I have a 500 word/day writing habit that ensured the chapter would get done eventually… but without that habit, I might have waited months to write this.

If you're anything like me, - caused by perfectionism or any other reason - is a major stressor in your life. Heck, maybe this chapter alone is the main reason you decided to read this book.

Since I started College Info Geek, I've done a *lot* of research on procrastination. At this point, I could probably write an entire book about it - and it's actually my

It's the easiest excuse in the book. Don't feel like doing something? Eh, it's probably not going to kill you if you wait on it. You can always go to the gym tomorrow. That book you're reading isn't going to burst into flames if you don't read a chapter tonight.

Embrace the Netflix…

Here's the thing, though….

That may be the most important sentence in this entire book. Burn it into your brain.

There is no invisible Ghost of Not Feeling Like It that forces your mouse to click on your Reddit bookmark instead of your study guide. Neither does it paralyze you and prevent you from going on a run.

While it's true that every action we take as humans requires some amount of motivation, the grand majority of us have enough willpower to do the things we've committed ourselves to doing. We have enough stored up to get over, "I don't feel like it," though it might take a bit of effort to muster it.

You dug holes in the sandbox as a kid, right? (Or am I just weird?) Scooping up the sand was really easy. Once you hit the dirt, digging became a little bit harder, but it was still doable. After that, you'd hit clay and the work became pretty tough. You had to really press that little plastic shovel hard to dig up the clay.

Eventually, you'd hit rock and wouldn't be able to dig anymore. But, with effort, you were at least able to get past the dirt and clay to reach that point.

Your willpower reserves are the same. There's a small "sand layer" of willpower that you get each day. After you've used that up, you still have a considerable amount left - it just takes some effort to tap into it.

To tap that willpower and get over "I don't feel like it," I've modified my vocabulary a bit. Now, I never say those five words alone anymore; instead, I say,

"I don't feel like it - but I'm going to do it anyway."

Embracing this mindset and actually putting it into action afterwards takes - a willingness to be uncomfortable. For most of us, life is ridiculously

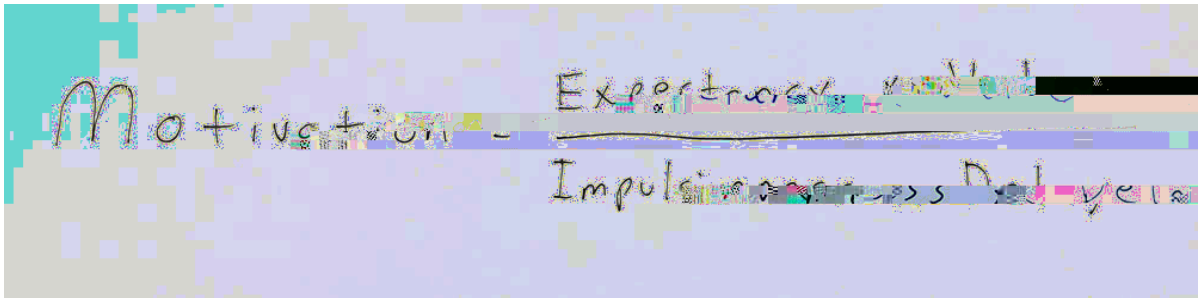
comfortable, which makes it tempting to avoid things that are hard and to stay comfortable.

Building up a tolerance to uncomfortable situations will help you get over a lack of easily tappable willpower. I actually take ice cold showers every day in order to build my own grit; it's a deliberate choice to be uncomfortable that I make daily.

Understand the Procrastination Equation

Can you actually quantify your motivation levels? According to you can. Developed by motivation researcher Piers Steel, this theory posits an actual equation with several factors that can be used to explain motivation.

This is called the and it can be a useful tool for pinpointing exactly *why* you might be feeling a lack of motivation to get something done. Here's the equation:



On the left side, we've got the end value , the resource you use to complete any task for which you expect a particular reward.

Now let's break down each of the components on the right side:

Your perceived odds of being able to complete the task and get the reward. How confident are you that you can succeed?

How valuable the task's reward is to you. Do you really care about what you'll get when you finish?

The other components, though, are more malleable. Therefore, if you're experiencing a lack of motivation, you need to do one of three things:

- - do something that increases your confidence in being able to complete the task.
  - make the reward greater, or tweak the process of doing the work in order to make it more enjoyable.
  - figure out how to avoid distractions, remain focused, and work diligently.

Luke Muehlhauser, a writer I've been following for some time, outlined an of sorts that he follows when he finds himself procrastinating. Here it is:

1. *Notice* you're procrastinating. Deliberately state it to yourself, "I am procrastinating right now."
2. Try to guess *which* part of the equation is causing you trouble. Are you feeling impulsive? Does the reward not motivate you? Are you not feeling up to the task?
3. Find a way to *fix* that problem area.

If the Value is low, you could gamify the task or add an additional, fun reward to its completion. If you're experiencing low Expectancy, try breaking down the task further so you can complete part of it and start building some confidence-boosting success spirals. For the problem of Impulsiveness, try the environment design techniques in Step 5 and set time-based goals.

Build Strong Habits

The science of willpower is a detailed, complicated field. However, there's really only one thing you need to know about it right now: Whenever you have to motivate yourself to do something, you're pulling from a finite source of willpower.

However, your *habits* don't need to pull from willpower. Habits govern far more of your behaviors than you might think, and the good thing is that you can create new, positive habits with some up-front effort. Once you've encoded a task as a habit, you'll be able to complete it on a regular basis without having to use up a ton of willpower.

This is good, because one of the true keys to success in college is putting in

When you turn this daily effort into a habit, great results will follow. Here's some proof:

- By designing a habit to write 500 words a day, I was able to finish most of this book in a couple months' time.
- A habit of reading and taking notes has resulted in a *Book Notes* folder in Evernote with over 7,000 words of notes on three different books over the

I have friends who almost never let themselves do the really fun things they want to do during the semester. They'll talk about how much they want to play a certain game or watch a new movie, but when I suggest that they just go play it, they'll say:

> "I really can't; I have way too much homework and I'd feel guilty."

Five minutes later, though, I'll see them scrolling through their Facebook feed.

This is a common problem, and I call it the problem of
Scrolling through your news feed or watching a few funny videos on YouTube is easy, and it's sort of fun to do. However, because it's so easy and feels so unlike "real" fun, it's easy to not feel guilty about it - which leads to a lot of procrastination.

Sadly, if these friends could just avoid the low-density fun, they'd get their work done faster and actually have time for those medium/high-density fun things they wanted to do in the first place.

The solution? If you want to play *Skyrim* later, commit to starting it at 8 p.m. Then, make sure all your work is done by then. Let your high-density fun create a deadline that propels you into focused work. Combined with the distraction-fighting techniques in Step 5, this

A key part of this technique is the postponing of interruptions; if you're distracted during a session by something, you should quickly pause and schedule some time in the future to take care of that distraction - then get back to work.

The idea behind the Pomodoro Technique is to create as much "flow" time as possible. By deliberately postponing any distractions (that can't be ignored altogether), you encourage your brain to spend more time in that flow state.

When All Else Fails, Bring the Pain

There's a blogger I follow named Maneesh Sethi who actually hired a girl off of Craigslist to sit next to him in a coffee shop and *slap him in the face* whenever he started procrastinating. Now, he's developing a wearable device that will deliver an electric shock when you aren't doing what you're supposed to be doing.

These things might sound crazy, but it's undeniable that pain can be a motivating factor. If the result of *not* doing a task is much less pleasant than actually doing it, we'll always do it.

If you're really struggling with procrastination, you can try to use this to your advantage. You don't necessarily need to use physical pain, either - a threat of loss or embarrassment can work just as well.

For example, I use a website called Beeminder to put a little bit of a threat on my blog's publishing schedule. Beeminder lets you set goals and actually pledge money towards them; if you fail to stick with your goal, the site will charge you whatever you pledged.

I have a goal in Beeminder to publish 3 pieces of content every week; currently, if I fail, I'll lose $10. Every time you fail, however, the price to recommit triples. They also have a premium feature that lets you set a custom pledge amount - the writer Nick Winter pledged over in order to force himself to write a book.

You can use Beeminder to track almost any kind of goal, and there are other ways you can introduce a threat into your goals as well. You could get an accountability partner, for example. I really liked this guy's hilarious deal with his roommate:

> Back when I was in college, my roommate and I had a pact.

Step 8 - Study Smarter

Much of this book has already tackled topics that can help you become better at studying. We've gone over how to beat procrastination, how to read and take notes, how to build your environment, stay organized, plan well, etc.

However, *this* step will focus on the actual act of sitting down and attempting to permanently encode information you've already learned once into your brain.

Replicate the Test Conditions

This may seem like an obvious question, but ask yourself: *Why are you studying?* You're going through your classes and major because there's a specific set of information and skills you want to learn… but there's a more reason as to why you need to study *now.*

That reason is the Your immediate need to learn and remember certain material from your classes stems from the quizzes, exams, and essays you'll face later on. You can take advantage of this fact by attempting to when you study. If you can simulate your exams during your study sessions, then you'll experience much less anxiety and be far more prepared when you actually walk into your tests.

Here's a simple process for doing this:

Use the details from your syllabus and other materials handed out by your professor to start making a list of the that you think will be covered on the test. You should also review your notes and look for the top-level terms and concepts that were covered in class - these will probably show up on your test.

Your syllabus may provide hints by listing topics covered in class, specific reading assignments, etc. - so make sure you consult this as well.

If your professor happened to provide a *study guide* for the test, this is the equivalent to a bar of gold. Actually, gold isn't all that useful in an objective sense… ok, it's even more useful. In my experience, study guides from your professor are often an outline of *exactly* the material you'll be tested on. I vividly remember going through my Human Sexuality study guides, only to show up on test days and realize my exams were basically exact copies of said study guides. I should have brought one of those Easy Buttons to class with me.

Assuming your professor doesn't just hand you the keys to the kingdom in the form of a study guide, Start looking at your list of important topics, terms, and concepts you put together, and turn those into a list of that will force you to recall the information *actively* (more about this in the next section).

Think of yourself as an army for the purposes of this study session; right now, you're a team of You're currently designing the combat drills that your soldiers will run through in order to build the muscle memory, team dynamics, and keen judgement required to be effective in a real combat situation.

If your army doesn't run through drills, or if the drills don't closely match what they'll find in real combat, then they won't be well prepared. That's why it's important to try, as closely as you can, to mirror the format of the exam when you study.

You can even play with other factors, such as the location and time constraints, once you've gained a solid grasp on the material. For big tests, it's often worth doing a final practice run to make sure you're ready. Remember this:

> "The mark of good learning isn't that you got it right; it's that you can't get it wrong."

The closer your study conditions are to your test conditions, the more you'll be

able to *reduce your anxiety* come test day. This is as anxiety actually *blocks* your ability to recall information easily. If you've the material, however, you can overcome this anxiety. And, if you've already experienced similar conditions to what you're facing during the test, that anxiety might not creep up as badly in the first place.

Now, get to work. Use your procrastination-fighting techniques, and maybe even a bit of timeboxing, to force yourself to study. Fill out your study guide by actively answering the questions you created earlier. Test yourself until recalling the material is easy.

Godspeed, friend.

Emphasize Active Learning

I've had friends who would "study" for a test by opening the lecture slides and lazily scrolling through them. I'm not sure if they were hoping to learn by osmosis or something, but *spoilers*… it didn't work well.

simply trying to expose yourself to information in the hopes that it'll "sink in" somehow - isn't very effective. Your brain learns best when it's forced to *do* things - work out hard problems, recall previous information it learned, etc.

This is called and it should form the basis of all your studying efforts. This starts with active reading, as I talked about in Step 3 - you should go through your reading assignments intently, either by highlighting, taking notes, or summarizing what you read.

Your proclivity towards active modes of learning should then extend to your studying and review sessions. This is another huge reason I showed you the process in the last step - the act of gathering your materials, creating a study guide from them, and then answering those questions (essentially quizzing yourself) is all part of learning actively.

Use Spaced Repetition

When it comes to learning lots of individual facts and pieces of data - vocab terms, foreign language words, definitions -

often. As you study, a spaced repetition system will record your performance on each item and define a period of waiting before showing you that item again. If you find it easy to recall the information, you won't see it for a long time; if it's difficult, you may see it multiple times in the same study session.

This benefits you in two ways:

1. You efficiently spend your study time on the things you still need help learning
2. Your brain is forced to recall each item at the point where it's closest to forgetting it

The harder your brain has to work to recall something, the more useful that instance of recalling it is.

Spaced repetition studying is most often carried out with flashcards, and the most useful program for practicing it is called Anki. This app is available for every major platform as well as on the web, and it lets you create "decks" of cards that you study just like paper flashcards.

Anki also has a large bank of shared decks made by others, which you can definitely peruse. However, I do think it's very useful to create your own decks, as the act of creating study materials exposes your brain to the material in a different context - creation instead of review. This, in turn, helps you become even *more* familiar with it. Remember those professors that let you fill out a single notecard for use on a test? The kids that spent all night trying to cram their entire textbook onto the notecard in uber-tiny handwriting ended up learning a lot of that material in the process. Creating your own flashcard decks has a similar effect.

As you study with Anki, you'll provide it with a difficulty rating for each flashcard once you reveal its answer. Anki will take these ratings and use them to figure out how long to wait before showing you that card again.

Anki takes advantage of the which is a phenomenon in our brains that makes it easier to remember information that is presented in multiple, spaced-out study sessions rather than one huge cramming session. As a result, Anki is at its best when you start using it early and regularly. While you can fiddle with its settings to help with late-night cramming sessions, it won't be as useful. Hopefully, though, your planning skills will eliminate the need to do this very often!

How to Study Math (and Similar Subjects)

Subjects like history are like jigsaw puzzles; you can start almost anywhere, and

why operations work the way they do. You need to grok the *underlying logic* behind the concepts you're learning.

When you do this, you no longer need to memorize things. Memorizing can help you fit shaped blocks into similar-shaped holes that you've seen before - "Ok, I know *x* goes *here* in this equation because I saw it before…" - but understanding will give you the ability to tackle problems with details you haven't seen before. A core understanding of the fundamentals makes it possible to deal with new things.

You should be shooting for the, "Aha!" moments. Let's step back from math for a second to take a look at another subject I've spent a lot of time in - programming. As a web developer, I've had to get my hands dirty with several different programming languages, as well as frameworks that build upon those languages and add their own constructs and shortcuts.

When you're learning a new language, you don't understand it. However, you're still able to look at the source code for a particular program or web page, look then to the actual product, and see that it works. You could just memorize the exact code and type something similar later on to get the same result - but you don't actually understand *why* it's giving you that particular output. You can't follow the logic of the code yet.

Since web development was my job, though, I *needed* to know the "why." It was my job to use these tools to create new projects with different features, so I needed to understand the underlying logic. Eventually, after spending hours pouring over existing code, tinkering and changing things, reading through documentation, and asking for help, it'd finally "click" and I'd say:

"Ooooooooohhhhh!!!!"

These are the moments you should seek when studying math. If you don't understand a concept well enough to work problems that use it, you need to keep pushing until that concept "clicks." Your goal is true understanding, not mere memorization.

A good rule of thumb for gauging understanding is the "Explanation Test." If your kid brother asked you about the concept you're studying, could you adequately explain it to him? Could you work through an example problem with him and tell him *why* each step happened the way it did? If not, you have more work to do.

In high school, my idea of studying math was sitting back in my chair and watching the teacher go through example problems on the board. During class,

I'd watch him go through each step and think, "Yeah, that makes sense. I could do this myself."

Here's the thing: Sitting back in your chair and watching your teacher do math makes you good at… sitting back in your chair and watching your teacher do math.

Math is not a spectator sport. While you're in class, you should strive to record as much detail as possible in your notes - including the fully worked-out versions of practice problems - because later you need to hunker down and actually on your own.

Math is all about going through the actual procedures, working the problems, and getting your hands dirty with the concepts and rules. During math tests, you won't spend much of your time answering true/false questions about math concepts. Learn their definitions, yes - but spend most of your time working out problem after problem after problem. *This* is what you'll have to do during a test, and the only way you're going to get good at it is *practice.*

In addition to doing lots of problems though, you can also Ask your professors, form a study group, or use one of these online resources (they're certainly not the only ones):

- Wolfram Alpha - type a math problem into the search bar and it'll both solve it *and*

Step 9 - Write Better Papers

On my first day of 10th grade, I walked into Mrs. Coover's *Honors English I* class and expected it to be a complete cakewalk, much like every other English class I had ever taken.

Five minutes later, she announced,

> *"Each of you has six essays to write by the end of the week."*

Jaws dropped. Eyes bulged. Incredulity became more than a shared mental state; it became a tangible part of the atmosphere itself. You could breathe it.

Of course, none of us died. Writing six essays was tough, and the class remained difficult for the rest of the semester - but we made it through, and with incredibly improved writing skills to boot.

Due in part to the solid foundation Mrs. Coover's class gave me, writing a 5-page paper is no longer a daunting task for me. This section of the book will attempt to make it a bit less daunting for you as well.

Do a Brain Dump

Your process for completing a writing assignment should start out much like any other assignment; you'll use the skills you learned from Step 6 to gather all the relevant materials and instructions you need to plan out the project and make

- Outside sources you'd like to research
- Quotes from others that come to mind

The brain dump is completely unstructured. Your resulting document should look like a mess, because it's a direct representation of what's in your head right now - a messy, unfocused jumble of ideas and questions.

Once you've got that jumble in a safe, permanent place, you can start on the next phase of the process.

Develop a Focus and Key Questions

Now that you've done your brain dump, the next major task you'll be undertaking is .

However, you should first take some time to do two things:

1. Develop a well-defined for your paper
2. Come up with several that you'd like to answer

Research is messy, and if you're not focused, it's going to take you a lot longer to extract meaningful information from your sources.

By developing a focus, you're giving yourself with your research. It'll also help you to *stay on-point* later when you're writing. My friend Ransom Patterson mentioned in a guest post on CIG that many students make the mistake of not having a clear point when writing their papers; you want to make sure you don't make this mistake.

By taking the time to come up with questions you'd like to answer about your topic, you're creating little mini-goals you'll have in mind while reading. Have you ever tried to look at your surroundings and pick out every object of a certain color? Interestingly, if you close your eyes and focus your mind on that color first, things of that color will stand out much more prominently when you look around again. You've primed your brain to notice that color. Writing questions has a similar priming effect on your brain when you're doing research, so don't skip out on it.

Annotation shouldn't be thought-of as full-blown note-taking; you've got the sources available, so don't worry about taking super-detailed notes. Rather, I recommend skimming your sources quickly and creating short notes that reference page numbers. For online sources you've clipped, Evernote has a handy highlighting feature that works well.

That last step of the process, deciding if you're done, is quite personal. Cal's suggestion is to list out all the main facts and points that are crucial to support your thesis and make sure you've got at least two sources for each. For topics that might not be crucial, but that you still might like to add, try to have at least one source.

Write an Awful First Draft

structure and all that jazz.

When you write this awful, terrible, no-good first draft, write it in a place where you're . This means either:

- Writing in a document separate from the one that'll become your final paper
- Writing in an entirely different application

I do a lot of my awful writing in Evernote. I actually have a "Daily Writing" notebook, where I try to simply vomit out words on a prompt every morning. These words will eventually become beautifully crafted blog posts, book chapters, and videos - but in Evernote, there's no pressure for them to look good right away. I know Evernote isn't where I'll publish the final product, so I don't care if the writing there isn't polished.

Other times, I'll do my awful writing in Byword

paragraphs, and sometimes entire sections that sounded good at first, but that don’t pull their weight upon more careful inspection.

on to the second phase of editing:

At this stage, you're looking through your paper for things like:

- Spelling and grammar mistakes
- Badly structured sentences
- Sentences or paragraphs that don't sound right
- Formatting errors

Here are a couple of useful tips for making the process of technical editing go more smoothly.

First, I find that proofreading my writing in its final intended medium helps me pay closer attention to the details.

For example, each week I send an email newsletter to my readers that updates them on that week's new video and podcast episode. Before sending it, I always email myself a test version and proofread it right in my inbox; often, I catch mistakes I didn't see when going over it in MailChimp's editor. My inbox

The first has to do with Having other people read through your paper is incredibly helpful, and you can have them do it at pretty much any part of the editing process.

Before you go throwing copies of your paper at all your friends, though, here are a couple pieces of advice you should consider from Microsoft researcher Simon Peyton Jones (who gave an excellent talk on writing research papers):

1. Use them carefully. Don't use up all your potential reviewers at the same time; show your paper to one, make changes based on their feedback, and then show it to another.
2. For the most part, feedback like, "I got lost here," or, "The second section was really boring," is much more useful than, "You spelled 'amphibian' wrong."

Also, be aware that both and make great reviewers. Experts

Step 10 - Make Group Projects Suck Less

My best friend Martin is an absolute champ. During his last year of college, he decided to condense all his remaining classes into a single semester so he could graduate early. Not only that, but he also landed an awesome internship with a company that doesn't normally hire interns.

In addition to working 20 hours a week at that internship, he also spent 6 hours a week commuting to it since it was an hour away from our apartment. Still, he held it down marvelously while completing his remaining classes.

Given that, I think the gods of academia owe him a sincere apology. Why?

Because, again and again over the semester, Martin's professors kept heaping group project after group project on him without end. Eventually, he got them all done - but they definitely took their toll.

My point here is that . They're terrible. Out of any given group you'll be assigned, it'll probably include:

-

you their part of the project so you can turn it in before the midnight deadline, it dawns on you…

This is but a taste of the real world that awaits you.

Your ridiculous backup plan of becoming a mountain man in the backwoods of the Yukon starts to seem like a tantalizing option now. You can almost taste the beaver meat and the glorious, solitary work of simple survival.

I, too, have dreamt those dreams. I, too, have watched hours of Wranglerstar videos on YouTube, trying to learn how to use a woodsman's axe sans the requisite years of experience.

Before you give in, though, let's see if we can make those group projects suck a little less.

Note: A beta reader suggested that, if you find this chapter useful, you might also want to check out Episode 42 of the CIG podcast, in which my friend

This first in-class meeting is your best opportunity to ~~assert your dominance by peeing on everyone~~ get to know everyone a bit, set up goals and expectations, and create strong communication channels.

During this first meeting, you should get everyone introduced and make sure to get everyone's contact information, including phone numbers if you can and they're all comfortable with it. Also make sure to note down names and email addresses.

Also, you might need to blackmail them into doing your dirty work for you later in life, so make sure you get the names of their family members, their blood type, and their entire web browsing history. This paragraph is satire.

Don't just write down the contact info; enter it into the system you'll be using to communicate and make sure everyone in the group can access it *before* you leave class.

Other things you'll want to do:

- Set up the collaboration and communication systems you'll be using (I'll go over my recommendations in a later section).
- Have everyone candidly tell the group what their strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, etc. are.
- Discuss goals for the project and, if you have enough details and time, create some rough project milestones. If you're suitably Machiavellian, you'll structure your deadlines ahead of schedule to take advantage of the psychology of urgency. If you're suitably nerdy, you might even start creating Gantt charts.
- Assign initial tasks to your group members based on their strengths and preferences. Some might be ok with taking on more work if it's work they prefer, so if that one dude wants to do *all* the coding and none of the paper, it's probably a good idea to let him.

Also, make a *genuine effort* to get at least a little bit acquainted with the people in your group. You don't have to become best friends with them, but at least knowing their majors and making a bit of small talk can go a long way.

Lastly, if you can, set a time for the next meeting while everyone is there.

Avoid the Bystander E ect

> "I'm sure someone else will take care of it," said everyone ever.

While this effect is most often associated with emergencies and crimes-in-progress, it also rears its lazy head during group projects if you're not deliberate about assigning tasks. If there's some part of the project that isn't explicitly assigned, your group members may just assume that someone else will take care of it.

This leads up to an inevitable piece of advice for anyone responsible enough to read an entire book on earning better grades… *When in doubt, be the leader.*

Even if you don't fancy yourself a project manager, it's usually best to take up that mantle if no one else seems enthusiastic. Do you already take care of your own calendar and task list diligently? Did you actually implement the advice from Steps 4 and 6?

If so, you're leader material and you should probably just step up and volunteer to run the organization systems, assign the tasks, and be the person who ultimately turns in the project.

If the project if substantial enough, you can actually list it as experience on a resume! This tip comes from Brad Karsh, an experienced former recruiting director who read over 10,000 resumes and wrote the book *Confessions of a Recruiting Director,* which I highly recommend.

Solutions vs. Mixtures

Back to 6th grade science class we go! Remember the difference between and

> Mixtures are a unification of materials that retain their physical properties when mixed together. Like fruit salad, yummy yummy.
> Solutions actually change the physical properties of the materials they're made up of, rendering them inseparable by most physical means

You want your group project to be a each component should meld perfectly with the others, creating a well-executed final product. Too often, though, groups create patchwork projects that are not tightly integrated. It's very obvious that each group member just went off and did their portion alone, with the final product being slapped together at the last minute.

That's why your group needs an Someone should be assigned to collect

should pay attention to:

- Writing style and voice (it can be different, but not drastically different, from group member to group member)
- Transitions and consistently between the intro and outro
- Other formatting consistency
- Slide layout/design
- Making sure each member shows up to presentation day dressed at a similar level

To make the editor's job easier, the final deadline for each group member's assignments should be *well* before the actual due date of the project. This will also help to prevent people from being straight-up late with their work.

Use Great Tools to Be More E

When I hired Martin to help code the redesigned version of my website back in late 2013, we set up a Trello board for the project. It was *massively* helpful, as there were a ton of things to keep track of.

On a Trello board, you can create any number of lists, which in turn can hold any number of cards. Typically, a project will utilize these features like so:

- will describe the stages of the project - Planning, In Progress, On Hold, Done
- describe actual tasks that need to be done

The only real downside to Slack, honestly, is that you'll want to use it for *all* your online communication after getting used to it. It's that good.

Out of any app I'll recommend here, I'll assume you're the most familiar with Google Docs. It's probably just as well-known as Microsoft Office at this point.

For writing the first draft of your papers, though, I highly recommend using it over Word. Group members can collaborate on the same document at the same time, and it's ridiculously easy to open up said document to review changes. Downloading a Word doc is much less convenient.

You can also use Google Drive as a shared file storage space for any assets/ research your team needs to share during the project. Personally, I use Dropbox for most of my team file sharing, but Drive is generally easier to convince group members to use since they likely have a Gmail account already.

Fin - Where to Go From Here

Whew! We've covered a ton of information in this book, and we're finally finished.

Perhaps now you're wondering:

"What should I do now?"

To start, I suggest you identify 1-2 of improvement that you'd like

Since you're reading this book, you're most likely signed up the the CIG newsletter as well - so keep your eyes peeled for epic new articles, podcasts, and videos on these topics in the future.

If you'd like to start reading what's already on the site,

Who Am I?

If this book is your introduction to College Info Geek

$14,431 in student loans.

During the summer following my freshman year, I was politely rejected when I applied to write for a large college success blog I'd been following. Unwilling to let the article I'd written for them go to waste, I taught myself how to install WordPress and put up a little blog called College Info Geek.

Four years later, CIG attracts over 200,000 students every month. The site has over 500 articles on studying better, becoming more productive, landing internships and jobs, and mastering money.

In addition to the research that went into all those articles and my own personal experiments in learning and productivity, I've also learned from true experts in numerous fields through the conversations I've had on the College Info Geek podcast - a weekly show that interviews successful students, entrepreneurs, and other really smart people on learning, productivity, career advice, and more.

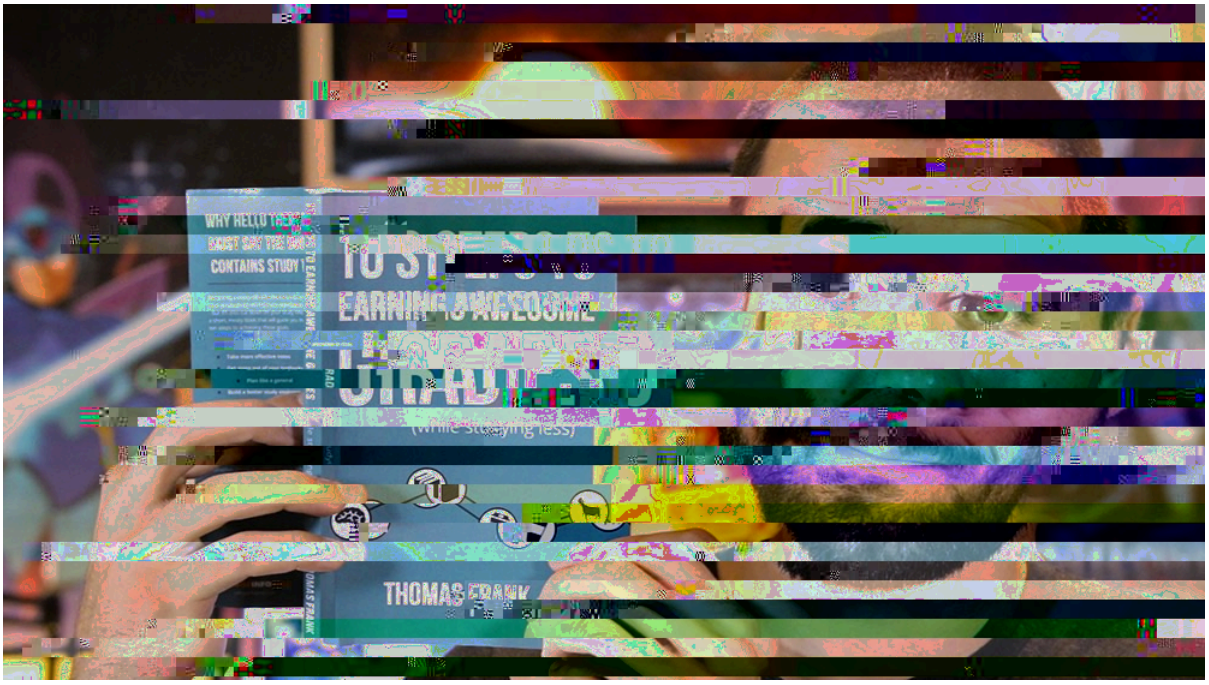
Lastly, I also create weekly videos at the College Info Geek YouTube channel.

If you'd like to connect with me, I'm @TomFrankly on Twitter and would love to hear from you. Feel free to send me any questions you have, and also let me know what you thought of this book!

Want a Paperback Copy of This Book?

One last note! Since I released this book for free on my website in January 2015, I've had a lot of requests to create a print version. As someone who definitely enjoys having a well-stocked bookshelf, I can totally understand that request.

So now it's a thing you can buy! I spent hours reading up on book editing and formatting techniques, crafted a print-worthy draft, and end up with something I think you'll really enjoy if you happen to like books with pages you can actually turn.



It's available on Amazon now, so if you'd like a copy, _____ to head over there and grab one!

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