

# DR. T'S TEN TIPS FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The following is a bonus list of helpful hints that will help you “succeed” in college. “Succeed” is placed in quotation marks because success does not necessarily (or often) equate to obtaining a perfect 4.0 GPA. Instead, success should be measured by how you overcome difficulties, which sometimes means you will get “less than desired” grades.

1. **ATTEND CLASS.** Woody Allen once said that “90% of life is just showing up.” But showing up isn’t always that easy when there are many different distractions competing for your time and attention. Attending every class, and showing up on time, requires a basic level of self-discipline that will translate into success in other categories. If you cannot show up regularly for class on time, chances are you will not be able to keep up with readings, finish term papers on time, etc.<sup>1</sup>
2. **FINISH ASSIGNMENTS BEFORE THE DUE DATE.** This is an extension of the first tip. Set a goal of completing homework assignments or term papers well in advance of the actual due date (e.g., two days ahead of time). If you finish the assignment early, you reduce stress upon yourself. Moreover, it gives you a chance to review and rewrite your assignments. Every assignment can be improved via proofreading and rewriting. Every. Single. One.
3. **FORM STUDY GROUPS.** The best way to learn something is to be able to explain it to others. Study groups allow you to “set aside” your notes and attempt to explain what you learned in class to others who can give you feedback and offer corrections. Study groups should not be more than four people.
4. **PARTICIPATE.** You can earn your degree by being a wallflower and never raising your hand in class, but your college education will be much worse for it. Take a chance and volunteer your thoughts on a topic in class. You may be utterly wrong and say something unbelievably stupid. You will be embarrassed. However, this is how you learn, by taking chances. Speak up!
5. **MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS.** There are lots of shiny, sparkly things in college and the “big city.” Feel free to indulge in some of these opportunities (the legal ones, at least), but don’t get too bogged down with extracurricular activities. Your main goal is to complete your academic degree in a reasonable time frame. I often suggest to first year students to participate in one extracurricular activity during their first term, be it a formal one (e.g., dorm government) or informal (e.g., bowling with friends every Friday). If you can attend each and every class on time and finish assignments before the due date, then feel free to increase your extracurricular load in the next term, but always be ready to jettison some of those activities if they cut into your academic goals.



6. **GET PLENTY OF REST.** Yes, you may be able to pull an “all-nighter” and pass an exam, leaving you with the impression that this is how things get done. Sometimes this works, but in general this is a long-term recipe for disaster. Before an exam, try to get *at least* six hours of solid sleep. A rested brain is one that performs much better. Also, in economic terms, there are significant marginal declining returns to staying up all night studying. The first hour of studying – say between 8 pm and 9 pm – might net you significant gains. By the time the fourth or fifth hour rolls around (12 am), each additional unit of time would be better spent sleeping.



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<sup>1</sup> If you have a serious contagious disease, use common sense and stay away from a crowded classroom. If you must miss class, do your best to get notes from other students and finish assignments on time.

7. **LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES.** Find opportunities to interact with faculty, possibly assisting in their research. Internships and travel abroad also offer up great experiences to learn new things and expand your social and professional network. Collaborate with other students on outside projects, possibly starting your own business. Not all learning occurs in the classroom; avail yourself of such opportunities (keeping in mind Tip #4).
8. **PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION.** When interacting with faculty, present yourself in a professional manner. Your emails should be more formal than texts to your friends. Unless otherwise advised, defer to professional titles such as “Dr.” or “Professor.” Include an obvious subject line in the email, and use proper grammar and spelling. When interacting with faculty and advisors in person, follow the same rules and be sure that you respect the time of busy individuals. It is a good idea to think of college as your job. Continually evaluate what you are doing with a simple question: “If I did this in my professional career, what would my boss say if I did this (e.g., ask for an extension on a project)?” (Note: Contesting a grade on an exam or essay should be done judiciously. Be prepared to defend why your answer was correct, often writing it down beforehand. Challenging every point, and doing so frequently, diminishes your reputation among the faculty and will be so noted in recommendation letters. If you did worse than you thought on an exam, approach the faculty member with humility and say, “I really missed this point. Could you help me understand what I did wrong?” That attitude will earn you a great deal of respect.)
9. **GET A JOB.** Earning an income can help pay for your college, but more importantly you will learn a great deal when you have to juggle a job and an academic schedule. Low-paying service sector jobs may seem demeaning for a super smart UW student, but experience in the service sector teaches you about interacting with many different types of individuals.
10. **ACADEMIC HUMILITY.** Yes, you may have had a 4.6 GPA in high school, but that does not mean you are next in line for a Nobel Prize. The older you become, the more you will realize that you know much less than you think you are (cf. Hayek 1945). Recognizing that earlier in your life will make you a more bearable person, and will actually free your mind to learn. As noted above, learning is about making errors and figuring out how to correct those errors. The person who thinks they do no wrong is somebody who has not learned anything. Also, remember that there are many different types of “smart,” although we only tend to acknowledge “book learning” or “memorization.”<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> It amazes me how many people think that Jeopardy champions are “really smart.” These champions may have a big storehouse of memorized facts, but it is what one can do with those facts – i.e. apply them to an unknown situation with logic – that determines how “smart” one really is.