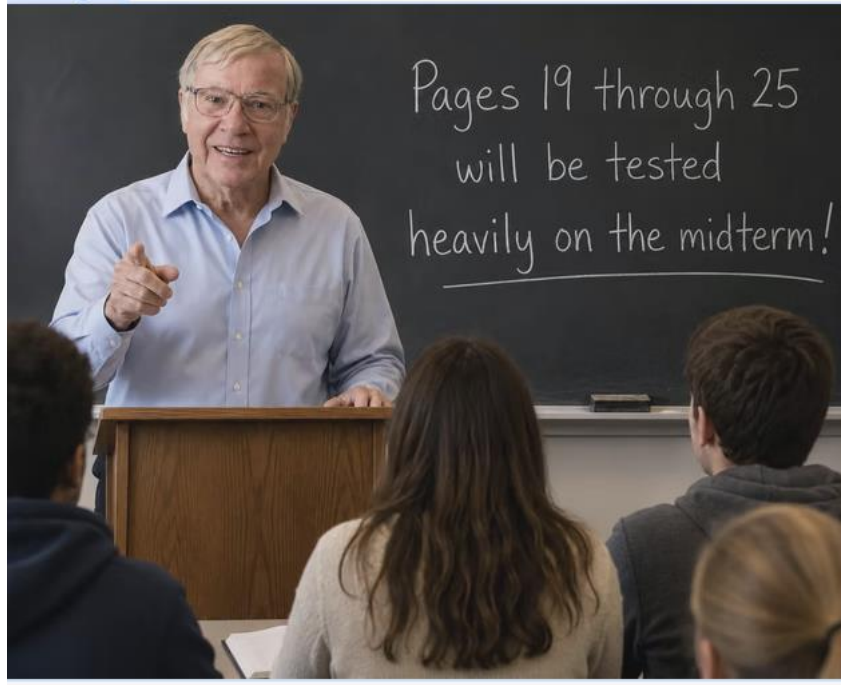




Pay Attention to the Teacher: How to Succeed in Class

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Students sometimes make academic success more mysterious than it needs to be. They search for study tricks, worry about what will be on the test and wonder what the teacher expects. Yet when you have a good teacher, one of the best strategies is remarkably simple: **Pay attention to what the teacher is trying to teach you, understand what is expected of you and then do the work.**

That doesn't mean blindly following instructions or accepting everything a teacher says without question. Good students should question, investigate and think for themselves. But an effective teacher has usually designed the course with a destination in mind. Individual readings, lectures, discussions and assignments are steps along the way. Students who understand that larger process have a considerable advantage over those who treat every assignment as an isolated obstacle standing between them and a grade.

Trust the Learning Process

Learning something genuinely new can be uncomfortable. Old assumptions may have to be discarded, unfamiliar concepts can initially seem confusing, and sometimes the student has to struggle with an idea before it begins to make sense. A good teacher recognizes that uncertainty and presents new material in manageable pieces, building one concept upon another.

The student has a responsibility in that process, too. You may not immediately understand why a particular reading, exercise or assignment matters, so give the teacher enough trust to see where it leads. In college, the syllabus usually provides the road map by explaining course objectives, assignments, grading and expectations. High-school teachers similarly establish goals and standards for their classes. **Read them and pay attention to them. They're telling you how the course works.**

Do the Reading and Do the Writing

Reading and writing assignments aren't simply chores invented to occupy your evenings. Ideally, they're there because the teacher believes they'll help you understand and apply the course material. If you're assigned something to read, read it; if you're expected to respond in writing, take the assignment seriously.

Writing is particularly valuable because it forces you to organize what you think you know. A short response, essay or term paper requires you to retrieve information, make connections and explain ideas coherently. It also gives the teacher evidence of what you understand—and what you don't.

Listen to What the Teacher Emphasizes

Lectures and classroom activities are worth more than the sum of their parts. Effective teachers constantly signal what's important through repetition, examples, questions and emphasis. Sometimes they'll make it unmistakably clear: “This could easily be a question on your next exam.” Write that down. There's a pretty good chance it will be.

But don't listen only for test questions. Notice which concepts the teacher repeatedly returns to and how one topic connects with another. Those connections often reveal the real purpose of the course and make the material much easier to remember than a collection of disconnected facts.

Show That You're Learning

The teacher's ultimate goal should be learning, while the student's immediate goal often includes getting the best grade possible. Fortunately, those objectives don't have to conflict. Participate when participation is expected, ask questions when you don't understand something, complete assignments carefully and on time, and use feedback from earlier work to improve later work.

If you're struggling, talk to the teacher before you're hopelessly behind. All of these behaviors communicate something important: **You're engaged in the course and taking responsibility for your own success.**

“Do What I Tell You to Do”

Years ago, I heard a story about an old and well-respected college professor who was asked by a student, “Professor, how can I do well in your class?” His answer was wonderfully simple: **“Do what I tell you to do.”**

There's more wisdom in that answer than first appears. He wasn't demanding mindless obedience. He was telling the student that the route to success wasn't hidden: Attend class, pay attention, read the material, do the assignments, learn from corrections, ask questions and meet the standards the instructor has clearly established.

A good teacher can point you toward learning, explain difficult ideas and help you when you stumble, but the teacher can't learn the material for you. So when you find yourself in the classroom of an effective teacher, take advantage of it: **Pay attention. Trust the process. Do the work.** You may be surprised how often that formula works.