

## Secrets of Straight-A Students

Education experts and students reveal the secrets of maintaining high grades.

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From [Reader's Digest](#)

### You Can Be A Super-Achiever

Everyone knows about straight-A students. We see them frequently in TV sitcoms and in movies like *Revenge of the Nerds*. They get high grades, all right, but only by becoming dull grinds, their noses always stuck in a book. They're klutzes at sports and dweebs when it comes to the opposite sex.

How, then, do we account for Domenica Roman or Paul Melendres?

Roman is on the tennis team at Fairmont (W.Va.) Senior High School. She also sings in the choral ensemble, serves on the student council and is a member of the mathematics society. For two years she has maintained a 4.0 grade-point average (GPA), meaning A's in every subject.

Melendres, now a freshman at the University of New Mexico, was student-body president at Valley High School in Albuquerque. He played varsity soccer and junior- varsity basketball, exhibited at the science fair, was chosen for the National Honor Society and National Association of Student Councils and did student commentaries on a local television station. Valedictorian of his class, he achieved a GPA of 4.4 -- straight A's in his regular classes, plus bonus points for A's in two college-level honors courses.

How do super-achievers like Roman and Melendres do it? Brains aren't the only answer. "Top grades don't always go to the brightest students," declares Herbert Walberg, professor of education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who has conducted major studies of super-achieving students. "Knowing how to make the most of your innate abilities counts for more. Infinitely more."

In fact, Walberg says, students with high I.Q.s sometimes don't do as well as classmates with lower I.Q.s. For them, learning comes too easily and they never find out how to buckle down.

Hard work isn't the whole story, either. "It's not how long you sit there with the books open," said one of the many A students we interviewed. "It's what you do while you're sitting." Indeed, some of these students actually put in fewer hours of homework time than their lower-scoring classmates.

The kids at the top of the class get there by mastering a few basic techniques that others can readily learn. Here, according to education experts and students themselves, are the secrets of straight-A students.

- **Set priorities.** Top students brook no intrusions on study time. Once the books are open or the computer is booted up, phone calls go unanswered, TV shows unwatched, snacks ignored. Study is business; business comes before recreation.
- **Study anywhere -- or everywhere.** Claude Olney, an Arizona State University business professor assigned to tutor failing college athletes, recalls a cross-country runner who worked out every day. Olney persuaded him to use the time to memorize biology terms. Another student posted a vocabulary list by the medicine cabinet. He learned a new word every day while brushing his teeth.

Among the students we interviewed, study times were strictly a matter of personal preference. Some worked late at night when the house was quiet. Others awoke early. Still others studied as soon as they came home from school when the work was fresh in their minds. All agreed, however, on the need for consistency. "Whatever I was doing, I maintained a slot every day for studying," says Ian McCray, a Middlebury College student from New Jersey.

- **Get organized.** In high school, McCray ran track, played rugby and was in the band and orchestra. "I was so busy, I couldn't waste time looking for a pencil or missing paper. I kept everything right where I could put my hands on it," he says.

Paul Melendres maintains two folders -- one for the day's assignments, another for papers completed and graded. Traci Tsuchiguchi, a top student at Clovis West High School in Fresno, Calif., has another system. She immediately files the day's papers in color-coded folders by subject so they'll be available for review at exam time.

Even students who don't have a private study area remain organized. A backpack or drawer keeps essential supplies together and cuts down on time-wasting searches.

- **Learn how to read.** "The best class I ever took," says Christopher Campbell, who graduated from Moore (Okla.) High School last spring, "was speed-reading. I not only increased my words per minute but also learned to look at a book's table of contents, graphs and pictures first. Then, when I began to read, I had a sense of the material, and I retained a lot more."

In his book *Getting Straight A's*, Gordon W. Green, Jr., says the secret of good reading is to be "an active reader -- one who continually asks questions that lead to a full understanding of the author's message."

- **Schedule your time.** When a teacher assigns a long paper, Domenica Roman draws up a timetable, dividing the project into small pieces so it isn't so overwhelming.

"It's like eating a steak," she says. "You chew it one bite at a time."

Melendres researches and outlines a report first, then tries to complete the writing in one long push over a weekend. "I like to get it

down on paper early, so I have time to polish and review."

Of course, even the best students procrastinate sometimes. But when that happens, they face up to it. "Sometimes it comes down to late nights," admits Christi Anderson, an athlete, student-council member and top student at Lyman High School in Presho, S.D. "Still, if you want A's, you make sure to hit the deadline."

- **Take good notes** -- and use them. "Reading the textbook is important," says Melendres, "but the teacher is going to test you on what he or she emphasized. That's what you find in your notes."

The top students also take notes while reading the text assignment. In fact, David Cieri of Holy Cross High School in Delran, N.J., uses "my homemade" system in which he draws a line down the center of a notebook, writes notes from the text on one side and those from the teacher's lecture on the other. Then he is able to review both aspects of the assignment at once.

Just before the bell rings, most students close their books, put away papers, whisper to friends and get ready to rush out. Anderson uses those few minutes to write a two- or three-sentence summary of the lesson's principal points, which she scans before the next day's class.

## 5 More Secrets

- **Clean up your act.** Neat papers are likely to get higher grades than sloppy ones. "The student who turns in a neat paper," says Professor Olney, "is already on the way to an A. It's like being served a cheeseburger. No matter how good it really is, you can't believe it tastes good if it's presented on a messy plate."
- **Speak up.** "If I don't understand the principle my teacher is explaining in economics, I ask him to repeat it," says Christopher Campbell. Class participation goes beyond merely asking questions, though. It's a matter of showing intellectual curiosity.  
  
In a lecture on capitalism and socialism, for example, Melendres asked the teacher how the Chinese economy could be both socialist and market-driven, without incurring some of the problems that befell the former Soviet Union. "I don't want to memorize information for tests only," says Melendres. "Better grades come from better understanding."
- **Study together.** The value of hitting the books together was demonstrated in an experiment at the University of California at Berkeley. While a graduate student there, Uri Treisman observed a freshman calculus class in which Asian-Americans, on average, scored higher than other minority students from similar academic backgrounds. Treisman found that the Asian-Americans discussed homework problems together, tried different approaches and explained their solutions to one another.  
  
The others, by contrast, studied alone, spent most of their time reading and rereading the text, and tried the same approach time after time even if it was unsuccessful. On the basis of his findings, Treisman suggested teaching group-study methods in the course. Once that was done, the groups performed equally well.
- **Test yourself.** As part of her note-taking, Domenica Roman highlights points she thinks may be covered during exams. Later she frames tentative test questions based on those points and gives herself a written examination before test day. "If I can't answer the question satisfactorily, I go back and review," she says.  
  
Experts confirm what Roman has figured out for herself. Students who make up possible test questions often find many of the same questions on the real exam and thus score higher.
- **Do more than you're asked.** If her math teacher assigns five problems, Christi Anderson does ten. If the world-history teacher assigns eight pages of reading, she reads 12. "Part of learning is practicing," says Anderson. "And the more you practice, the more you learn."

The most important "secret" of the super-achievers is not so secret. For almost all straight-A students, the contribution of their parents was crucial. From infancy, the parents imbued them with a love for learning. They set high standards for their kids, and held them to those standards. They encouraged their sons and daughters in their studies but did not do the work for them. In short, the parents impressed the lessons of responsibility on their kids, and the kids delivered.

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