

4 Popular Study Strategies That Don't Work—And 5 That Do!

After reminding your child to step away from social media, video games, and their cell phone—and to please stop staring at the wall and get to work!—it can feel like a win just to see your child looking at their homework.

But, unfortunately, not all studying strategies are equal. Just because a child appears to be studying doesn't mean they're actually learning the material. In fact, many of the common study techniques students default to do almost nothing to help them master concepts or prepare for tests.

In this guide, I'm going to reveal four popular study strategies that simply don't work and share practical tips for improving the effectiveness of each of those methods. Then, I'll show you five strategies that really do work—and are quite simple to practice!

Popular but Ineffective Strategy #1:

Rereading the Materials

Would you prepare for a road race just by studying a map of the course you had to run? What about getting ready for a violin recital by just looking at the sheet music? Of course not! But that's exactly what kids are doing when they study for tests by simply rereading their notes, textbook, and other class materials.

Most students apply this popular but ineffective strategy because they think about test preparation in very vague terms, rather than seeing it as a concrete set of tasks. This makes studying seem complicated and overly-difficult.

Homework assignments usually have a straightforward beginning and ending: finish the ten problems or write out the definitions for the twenty vocabulary words. But how do you know when you're done studying for a semester exam?

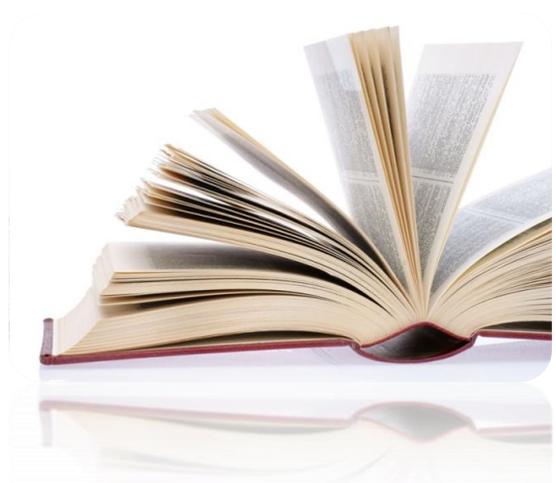
Well, how would you actually prepare for the race we just mentioned? You might run several times a week to build up your endurance. You might mix in some sprinting to build up your speed. You might walk the course ahead of time so that you didn't have to think too much about where to turn or what path to follow on race day.

And for the violin recital? You might prepare by actually playing the piece of music over and over, giving extra attention and repetition to the parts of the piece that give you trouble.

As it turns out, that's exactly the kind of preparation that our kids need for tests. If your child resorts to rereading class materials in order to study, they need a defined practice regimen that goes beyond just familiarizing them with the information. They need to practice actually *doing* what the test will ask them to do.

For example, to prepare for a math test, they need to work practice problems. To prepare for a Spanish test, they need to pick up a pencil and practice doing exactly what the test will require of them, whether it's conjugating verbs, translating sentences, or answering questions about a paragraph they read.

Once kids are in the mindset of practicing for a test rather than just looking over class materials, the steps they need to prepare become much clearer and more effective.



Popular but Ineffective Strategy #2:

Cramming at the Last Minute

Without an organized practice plan in place, many students put off studying until the night before a test, then try to cram the materials all at once. This is frustrating for parents, stressful for students, and simply ineffective for learning.



Part of the problem is that we often think of exams as testing what we have stored in our memory, but this isn't quite true. They actually test what we can *recall* from our memory at will. And "cramming" for an exam the night before it takes place doesn't help anyone practice their recall skills.

Researchers at Harvard University discovered that "[i]f learners spread out their study of a topic, returning to it periodically over time, they remember it better."

Just like with music and athletics, the most effective way to prepare is to distribute practice over several days instead of doing it all at the last minute.

It's better to run four times a week for thirty minutes than to run once a week for two hours, because your muscles get stronger as they recover. In the same way, studying twenty minutes a day for three days is more effective than studying just an hour in one day. Because the more often we practice recalling information, the better we will be able to summon it on an exam.

Your child can also space out study of a topic within a single study session by taking short breaks and switching between topics. For example, rather than studying math for an hour before dinner, chemistry for an hour after dinner and then history for an hour before bed, it can be more effective to do math problems for twenty minutes, history flashcards for twenty minutes and chemistry problems for twenty minutes, all in two or three different sessions.

Popular but Ineffective Strategy #3:

Passive Reading

Because we hear so much about the benefits of reading, few people realize that certain ways of reading are actually more (or less!) effective than others for understanding, mastering, and committing the material to memory.

Have you ever been reading a book and noticed that your mind began to wander? Your eyes could be sweeping across the pages, taking in the words, but your brain is totally focused on something else. If you were to go back and look at the pages you were reading, you probably wouldn't be able to remember much of the information contained there. You're reading, but it's a very passive approach to reading.

Unfortunately, kids—especially those with executive function weaknesses—often read this way. They are physically in front of their books, but their minds are all over the place. Active reading—reading intentionally for full comprehension and evaluation—takes practice and maturity.



Fortunately, active reading is a skill that can be learned and improved. One of the simplest strategies is to have kids pause every page or so and ask themselves questions about what they just read. (This is also known as “self-talk.”) If they are reading non-fiction, they might ask themselves, “What did I just learn? Why is it important? How does this fit with everything else in the chapter?”

If they're reading fiction, they can ask, “What just happened? Why did the character do that? What is the author trying to communicate?” There are infinite variations on these kinds of questions that can help young readers meaningfully interact with their reading material.

Another strategy is for kids to take notes as they read. These notes can answer the questions above, or they can record important information, facts, dates, and so on. This will take longer, but they will probably retain much more of what they have read for a much longer time. The most important thing is to develop the habit of pausing periodically and considering what they have just read, whether they write it down or just think about it.

Many students also find it helpful to “preview” or skim what they plan to read ahead of time, especially for non-fiction. By giving their brains a heads-up on what to expect, they make it easier to store and recall new information. After they are done reading, writing a short summary of the material (and then reviewing that summary later) is also a very effective way to retain and recall information.

Popular but Ineffective Strategy #4:

Staring at the Study Guide

When I was a teacher and provided study guides to my students, I quickly learned that many of them didn't know how to use it. In most cases, they would automatically take the study guide home and re-read it or passively stare at it. As you may imagine, this was a really inefficient use of their study time.

I soon discovered that many of the students who did well had parents who would get involved in their studying, engaging them with the material and asking them questions about it. But of course, not every child has parents who are able to do that, so I decided to teach my students how to take full advantage of their study guides on their own. Using a study guide effectively doesn't come naturally to children; they must be taught how to put this tool to work.



The first thing I did was hand out three copies of the study guide to each student. (This is rarely necessary now that study guides can be posted on homework portals or distributed by other electronic methods.) We would complete most of the first copy in class. Then I instructed them to go home and fill out as much of the second study guide as they could without looking at the answers. Once they got stuck, they could look at the first study guide and fill in the rest.

The second night, they could take the third blank study guide and repeat the process. At this point, they would be able to fill in almost all the answers on their own. Any answers they didn't

remember, they could then spend extra time studying. With this approach, students were able to focus on the parts that were giving them trouble rather than spending time on *everything* in the guide.

After teaching this method of studying, I finally handed out the tests. I watched anxiously as my students wrote furiously with their pencils. To my delight, the results were much better. This method worked amazingly well, and all my students who employed it saw their performance improve.

Of course, not every child took advantage of the new strategy, but those who did were able to excel even without the direct help of a parent. I knew I had given them a technique that would serve them well for the rest of their lives.

It is of course possible that not every teacher will give out a study guide for a test. Even in those cases, however, teachers should give students some idea about the scope of material that the test will cover.

Students can then create their own study guides and practice tests by looking at those sections of the textbook, discussion questions, and class notes. They should ask themselves what questions they think the teacher might ask and try to answer them.

For tests in math or science, they should try to rework homework problems multiple times. The overall method of study—focusing on recalling important facts and ideas—will work with or without a study guide.

5 Simple Study Strategies That Work

Rereading the materials, cramming at the last minute, passive reading, and staring at the study guide are all really common approaches to studying that do nothing to advance a child's understanding of the material—or help them prepare for a test!

Effective study strategies help a child *practice* rather than simply *look at* the material. Help your child increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their study time with the following five tips.



1 : Teach it Back

The Roman philosopher Seneca famously observed that “**While we teach, we learn.**” One of the best ways to learn is to explain information to someone else.



In our tutoring center, our tutors always use a 5 to 1 ratio for instruction and “**teach back**”, meaning that after every five minutes they spend teaching, they will have students spend one minute explaining the material back to them. This is the method my own math tutor used with me back in eighth grade, and it is extremely helpful for kids whose minds tend to wander in class.

2 : Utilize Multi-Modal Practice

Many educators have found it helpful to distinguish between three main styles of learning: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. **Visual learners** learn best from looking at pictures, maps, charts, graphs and other visual representations of data and ideas. **Auditory learners** learn easiest by listening to someone explain a concept. And **kinesthetic learners** grasp concepts more quickly when they use manipulatives and other tactile methods of learning.





Although students may prefer one way of learning over the others, we actually learn most effectively when we can employ all three modalities. Multi-modal practice engages the brain in many different ways, helping students **comprehend** more deeply and **recall information** more quickly and accurately.

There are several ways to do this. Students can make up **flashcards** to study visually, but they can also quiz and be quizzed by a parent or another student, **employing the auditory component**. Writing out the information utilizes a tactile method. The more students can study in a variety of ways, the better they will learn.

3 : Study in a Group

Students often learn more enthusiastically from one another. They can go over study guides together, asking each other questions and taking the opportunity to teach back the material to each other.

This can be done **in person** or by **video chat** over FaceTime or Skype. Of course, a large study group may not be the most effective, since it can be very easy to lose focus and simply socialize. A group of two to three students may be most effective



4 : Review Right Before Bed



We don't often think of sleep as a study aid, but it really is. **Reviewing** select pieces of information right before bed is another great way to help lock them into our **long-term memory**. A study at **MIT** confirmed that people who **napped** after memorizing certain information **remembered** more of it than those who did not nap.

5 : Utilize Study Apps

Having a phone nearby doesn't always have to be a bad thing for your child's study session. In fact, software engineers have developed some great applications to aid in learning and retention.

For example, **Quizlet** enables students to create their own electronic flashcards and will generate different kinds of practice quizzes and matching games to help them study. Evernote is an organizational tool to help students keep track of class notes, research, and other information with the ability to synch across devices.

StudyBlue connects students who want to study collaboratively, enabling them to share notes, study guides, and flashcards with each other. And GoConqr works great for visual learners, providing tools to create mind maps of various topics, as well as track how much they are learning.

Tools like these provide simple yet creative ways for students to interact with, rather than passively read over, their study materials—a key difference that can make or break a child's success on a test and beyond!

