

# The College Learner



## How to Survive and Thrive in an Academic Environment

Mary Renck Jalongo   Meghan Mahoney Twiest   Gail J. Gerlach



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How To Survive and Thrive  
In An Academic Environment

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# PREFACE

Obtaining an undergraduate college degree is no longer a luxury reserved for the elite few. Due to the steadily increasing levels of educational attainment in our nation, a college degree is as necessary for today's adults as a high school diploma was for their grandparents. In 1940, for example, the median number of years of schooling completed by adults 25 years of age or older was 8.6. That figure rose to 12.2 years in 1970 and 12.6 years in 1988. Today, about 45% of American adults have completed at least some college study (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 1994). We believe that the first step in working successfully with college students who are enrolled in a developmental reading and/or study skills course is to gain a contemporary perspective on college education. Although college may be a financial luxury, some work at the college level is now the norm rather than the exception.

The metaphor of a large audience assembled in an auditorium has been used to describe the educational situation in America: when the people in the first row stand, each successive row must also rise in order to see and participate. This metaphor applies in a fundamental way to the successful completion of a bachelor of arts or bachelor of science degree in the United States, for as more people earn graduate degrees, holding an undergraduate degree becomes "average." Our job as instructors who work with college students is to enable learners struggling for a wide variety of reasons to participate more fully in education, career, and society. The nature of our support in this endeavor is all-important. It must strike a balance for students that lies between structure and freedom, between building self-esteem and challenging intellect, between academic rigor and equity of educational opportunity.

## Philosophical and Curricular Issues

In deciding how to teach developmental reading and study skills, the most common approach is a remedial one. Here the role of the teacher is to cover material, the role of the student is to absorb it, and practice supposedly makes perfect. The underlying assumption is that somehow these students missed important skills, and, with intensive drill on low-level tasks, they will catch up and improve. At first, this approach might appear imminently logical. Yet, to borrow a medical analogy, what the remedial stance does is to aggressively administer more of the treatment that worsened (or at least failed to improve) the patient's condition in the first place. The materials used with a heavy remedial approach are less than satisfying for students and most instructors, yet the market is full of them. Materials with an unyielding remedial orientation look basically like programmed learning texts: lots of true/false, multiple-choice, and fill-in-the-blank items; an instructor's answer key; and boredom all around.

After more than 30 years of combined experience in teaching college reading and study skills courses, we contend that an overemphasis on the basics falls short of preparing students for the type of reading that they will encounter later on in other college classes. The reality is that most students will have a heavy reading load, be enrolled in several classes, and be expected to read complex material with an array of specialized vocabulary related to the specific subject area. Spoon-fed skills will not prepare college students for that reality.

Emphasizing affect is at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum of teaching developmental reading and study skills courses. Whereas the remedial approach focuses exclusively on thought, the affective approach focuses on feelings. Certainly, we are not opposed to building healthy self-esteem in students, but an overemphasis on “feeling good” is yet another way of disrespecting students because the implicit assumption is that they are incapable of meeting intellectual challenges. As a result, the instructor lowers expectations and focuses instead on readings followed by discussion, usually an exchange of lively but unsubstantiated opinions. In our opinion, this affective approach builds false confidence and fails to prepare students for most of the courses they will encounter later on because they have not exerted sufficient mental energy to replace their less effective strategies with more effective ones.

Put briefly, an overemphasis on remediation neglects the spirit, while an overemphasis on affect neglects the mind.

## Uniqueness of the Book

What, then, is a reasonable philosophical and curricular stance for working with college students who need support in improving their reading and study skills? As a beginning, we need to redefine literacy and help our students do likewise. Literacy is the lifelong project of mastering language, not one step up from illiteracy.

About this, Fingeret (1991) says:

We must be clear that the construction of meaning is at the heart of literacy, and it is rooted in experience, culture and language. Respect for cultural and linguistic background is not simply a matter of motivating, recruiting, or retaining students. It has to do with dignity, power, strength, and authority. Cultural and linguistic diversity must be celebrated, respected and incorporated into the relationships among teachers and learners. We cannot separate literacy from experience, culture and traditions. (p. 10)

We believe that high-quality teaching of academically at-risk college freshmen has three key features: an appreciation for student diversity, an emphasis on strategies rather than isolated skills, and a clear focus on constructing meaning. Let us consider each of these three points more closely.

**1. An appreciation for diversity**—When instructors say that they want beginning college students to “develop,” what they sometimes mean is that they want them to be more like college seniors, more like graduate students, more like themselves. Yet today’s college learners often have experiences that differ dramatically from those with which their instructors were familiar as young adults. Imagine a 1990s secondary classroom. Statistically speaking, out of a typical group of 25 contemporary secondary students:

- 3 will speak English as a second language;
- 4 will have mental or physical disabilities;
- 5 will not finish high school;
- 6 will be poor;

- 6 will have parents who will divorce in the next 6 years;
- 7 will routinely return to an empty house after school;
- 8 will live in single-parent homes;
- 8 will be one or more grade levels below their peers academically;
- 13 will have tried or are still using cigarettes, alcohol, and/or illicit drugs;
- 13 will have parents who were unmarried and/or were less than 20 years of age when they were born or will become teenage parents themselves (Collins & Mangieri, 1992).

Authentic respect for students holds them to high standards while giving them support. This is one reason that you will see samples of students' work and the text feature "Voices of Students" in this book. As the name implies, "Voices of Students" contains wisdom about college success gathered directly from students enrolled in college reading and study skills courses who ultimately excelled in college. We know from experience that students will take their peers' advice seriously.

**2. An emphasis on strategies**—Reading and studying well in college is strategic. Effective instruction in a reading/study skills course enables students to approach their future college studies with a measure of confidence and a "tool kit" of problem-solving strategies developed during the course. One of the huge tasks in writing this book was to review the many reading and learning strategies recommended by experts, use them in a variety of ways with our students in the classroom, and select those that have the widest applicability across disciplines and content. Yet simply presenting the strategies, modeling them for students, and even practicing them with students are not enough. Students must become flexible and efficient with the strategies—knowing which strategy to use when and which approaches work best for them as individuals. This is why you will see reading selections followed by practice in selecting and using strategies rather than lists of vocabulary words and their definitions. We do not anticipate that instructors will require every reading selection or complete every activity. Rather, we see the role of the instructor as that of a decision maker who selects the most appropriate material from a wide array of possible choices.

We understand that each institution—be it technical college, community college, liberal arts college, or major university—has its own idiosyncratic way of meeting the needs of the at-risk college student population. We realize that some instructors are teaching adults who work during the day and take night classes, while others are teaching recent high school graduates in a college preparatory course, and still others are working with more traditional groups of college freshmen in a learning support program. It is our intent to provide a range of choices that meet those individual needs rather than to overwhelm.

As you leaf through the book, you will see various figures, drawings, tables, and diagrams that illustrate the use of strategies, guidelines for practicing strategies, and self-evaluation checklists. All of these text features are designed to "show rather than tell" so that students recognize the practical advantage of the strategies we recommend throughout the book.

**3. A focus on meaning**—According to current definitions for the reading process, when comprehension is lost, reading is no longer taking place. The same holds true for all of the language arts—listening, speaking, writing. This is one reason why this text includes journal writing activities, for example, rather than true/false exercises.

Vygotsky's work emphasizes the social and contextualized nature of learning, which is something particularly important for college freshmen. Contrary to the "lone scholar" concept, most of us do our best learning with the support of other learners who challenge our ideas and stimulate our thinking. Belief in the social nature of learning is one reason the text feature of "Cooperative Learning Activity"

appears in each chapter. We have found that meaningful social interaction contributes to students' learning and motivation. The exceptionally comprehensive *Resource Guide for the Instructor* provides you with many additional suggestions on establishing an authentic learning community in your classroom, one that encourages collaboration and cooperation. Rather than stopping with objective test items for each chapter, we have included many activities that ask students to apply the reading and study strategies they are learning in each chapter.

You will notice also that the chapters treat topics in greater depth than many other college reading and study skills textbooks. This is intentional. We would argue that the "once over lightly" of a few discrete skills is no substitute for an understanding of the underlying principles. College reading and study skills should not, in our opinion, simply repeat what students have been told before in high school, or junior high school, or even middle school. They need to understand what they are doing and why, to internalize those strategies that will serve them well.

## Purpose and Audience

For all of the reasons already discussed thus far, our overriding purpose is to offer a new perspective on teaching college freshmen how to improve reading and study of college-level material. Instructors who reviewed earlier drafts of this book were an exceptionally diverse group. Some are in English departments; others are housed in colleges of education. Some have a degree in student personnel or counseling; others are reading specialists. Yet all of these affiliations and backgrounds that instructors use to identify themselves paled in importance to the individual instructor's teaching philosophy. Over and over again, those who were open to more holistic, student-centered approaches—regardless of the area of specialization, particular program features, and institutional characteristics—embraced this textbook as a long overdue yet fresh approach to teaching college reading and study skills.

Therefore, instructors who choose this book will generally be those who have questioned or are questioning the value of college "pep talk" books and books that read like a laundry list of isolated skills. Instructors who are willing to give *The College Learner* a try are those who never think that their teaching is a finished project and who recognize, as James Britton once said, that "the word for teaching is learning." We go beyond emphasizing rote memorization and focus instead on metacognition—thinking about thinking. In this way, we guide learners in gaining insight about their own thinking and learning processes with regard to language, study, and overall college success.

This textbook is intended for college freshmen who are enrolled in a developmental reading course, a study skills course, or some combination thereof. The book would also be useful as a text for high school seniors who are striving to improve reading and study skills prior to college entrance.

## Overview of the Book

Chapter 1, "Becoming an Active Learner," sets readers' expectations for the remainder of the book and encourages them to reassess their approaches and attitudes about various learning experiences. Chapter 2, "Managing Time, Study, and Stress," provides a basic overview of college study and survival strategies. Reading is the focus of Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3, "Understanding and Applying Reading Thought Processes," includes prereading strategies, such as scanning and self-questioning, then moves to comprehension-monitoring strategies, such as text marking and summarizing. Chapter 4, "Building a Background for College Reading," emphasizes the role of

prior knowledge in efficient, flexible reading. Because listening comprehension is a basic skill for college study and a foundation for reading, we have devoted Chapter 5 to listening and note taking. Another language ability that exerts an influence on a student's success in college is the ability to make oral presentations based on reading and study, yet this topic is virtually ignored in most college reading and study skills courses. To remedy this situation, we offer strategies that will enable students to develop oral presentation skills in Chapter 6, "Participating in Discussions and Making Presentations." Writing is a basic way of learning in college that relates not only to composition but also to study skills and reading, so Chapter 7 concentrates on the writing process. In Chapter 8, we take the traditional focus on test-taking strategies one step further by showing students how to develop skill in self-evaluation. The final chapter relates back to the first on active learning by discussing lifelong learning. Chapter 9, "A Look Ahead: Becoming a Lifelong Learner," is designed to encourage students to reflect on what they have learned and shows them not merely how to survive in college but how to thrive in an academic environment, both now and in the future.

## How to Use This Book

College reading and study skills courses are taught in different ways around the country. In some instances, they are separate courses; in others they are combined into a single "survival skills" course. The way that your particular course is structured will determine the best way to organize the chapters.

For a more general course that combines reading and study skills, you can use the existing organization of the book and emphasize the material that is most useful throughout.

For a course that focuses entirely on reading, we recommend that you begin with Chapter 1 on active learning, then emphasize the reading chapters (3 and 4), and use the remaining chapters as reading selections on which to practice the reading strategies. Our experience with college freshmen suggests that they generally are interested in reading "how-to" self-improvement-type material, and the remaining chapters of the book give you extensive resources in this area.

For developmental reading instructors who want to focus on whole texts written by leading American authors, you will probably want to supplement this text with a book of readings (such as *Visions Across the Americas*). You might also want to use a popular periodical (like *Newsweek* or *Time*) or a course packet of readings you have collected and obtained the copyright permission to use in class.

If you are teaching a course that focuses mainly on study skills, we suggest that you begin with Chapter 1 and emphasize Chapter 2, "Managing Time, Study, and Stress" as well as Chapter 8, "Developing Test-Taking Strategies and Skill in Self-Evaluation." The two chapters on reading (4 and 5) can be treated as a "studying from textbooks" unit. Chapter 6, "Participating in Class Discussions and Making Presentations," can also be approached from a study perspective—how students can communicate what they have learned through study to peers and the instructor. You will also find that Chapter 9, "A Look Ahead: Becoming a Lifelong Learner," is a good finale for a study skills course.

If you are teaching a course in a program that offers a separate course on writing, you may want to treat the writing chapter as a preview for that course or simply skip it. Those teaching a more general college preparatory course for students who are not required to take a separate writing course will find that Chapter 7 gives a brief overview of the process approach to writing that their students should find helpful.

We have arranged the chapters in the order that makes the most sense to us, but that does not mean that they cannot be rearranged to meet the needs of your particular group. Although the chapters are related, each one can stand alone as appropri-



ate reading material for college students and research-based recommendations for enhancing literacy processes. This is one reason that we have compiled all of the group activities at the end of the book. Some fit better with the content of one chapter than another, but we leave it to the individual instructor to decide when to use a particular group activity with the class.

## Conclusion

As Reynolds and Werner (1993/94) point out, working with college students should be a challenging, rewarding endeavor that expresses our care and commitment:

The improvement of college students' reading and study skills is a widespread concern for developmental educators, counselors, and college administrators in the U.S. There is a long, well documented history of trying to help new college students who are poorly prepared in academic content areas or who have weak reading skills and learning strategies. . . . One paradigm is "one size fits all." We do not favor it because it assumes that there are tried and true ways to study and that all learners should conform to them. We support an alternative paradigm that is more learner centered, where learners are allowed to develop skills and strategies in their own way and style [and to] . . . examine strengths and weaknesses in their current reading/writing skills and learning strategies, and explore, evaluate, and select alternate learning skills and strategies were needed. (pp. 272-273)

We hope that this book supports you in your efforts to realize these goals and create a new paradigm for teaching college reading and study skills.

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# TO THE STUDENT

The course you are about to take and this textbook accompanying it represent a turning point in your educational career. Starting today, you have the opportunity to make daily decisions about how you will learn. These decisions will affect the story of your life. Will you decide that college is too hard, too stressful, too much work, and takes too long? Will you allow other things to take precedence over your studies and abandon your college career? Or will you—as we hope, as your instructors hope, and as your family members hope—have the determination to make significant changes in your learning and master the strategies that will enable you to succeed in college?

The answer to these questions lies, not merely in your words, but in your actions. Only about one in two secondary students even gives college a try. Nearly everyone in that half who begins college *intends* to be successful, yet not everyone *becomes* successful. Statistically speaking, even though virtually all college students hope they will succeed, about half of them fail and have to repeat courses or drop out entirely. We want you to be in the half that succeeds, but nobody can make you successful in college. It is something you must do for yourself, no matter how much encouragement or support you might get.

To a considerable extent, whether you will be numbered among the successful is based on making the right decisions. The first decision is that college is worth the effort. Without a college education, it is estimated that your income level will average about \$10,000 a year less than those who complete college. The second decision is the recognition that your first responsibility, your full-time or part-time job for the next four years, is to be a learner and a student. The third decision is that you must be willing to master new, more effective strategies of learning even though it will take time and effort to learn, study, listen, read, speak, and write better than you ever have before. If you accept these three prime directives and decide that college is worth the effort, that being a student is your job, that you must make changes in your habits, then your chances for success will increase dramatically.

Everything about the content and design of this book has been planned to make it a tool for supporting your decisions, goals, and learning. Before you begin reading, you need to understand the purposes of various aspects of the book and how they can help you become a better college student. The features of the textbook are outlined here so that you can become familiar with them and their purposes before you encounter each feature in the chapters.

## Prereading Questions

The purpose of prereading questions is to get you thinking about the topic of the chapter, to give you a head start by accessing what you already know about the material. Students often complain that their attention wanes while reading a chapter and that they quickly forget what they have read. But if you begin by really thinking about the topic, it will help you get interested, get involved, and remember more of what you read. So do not skip over these questions to save time. Think of the time spent reflecting on the prereading questions as an investment in better understanding and better recall of what you read.

## Assessing Prior Knowledge

If you are like most students, you probably wish that you knew the secret of “speed studying,” of finding a more rapid and efficient way of mastering material that you are required to read. Research on learning suggests that taking stock of what you already know about a subject before you begin studying it is the most efficient way of studying. That is why we have incorporated “Assessing Prior Knowledge.” When we pose questions to you, the reader, before you get into the body of the chapter, we are teaching you a strategy that makes the most of your study time. Naturally, you will be encountering many different types of reading material in college. If you learn this simple strategy of taking stock *before* you start reading, it will make all of your studying more effective and efficient. Then when you are faced with the big test and fear that your mind will draw a blank, there will be more in your memory bank to draw upon.

## Vignettes

A *vignette* is a brief description of human behavior. The vignettes in this book are stories about college students we have known, their struggles in meeting the requirements of various courses, and the successes or failures that they experienced. Once again, you may be tempted to skip this part, thinking that it is not essential information. But research on narratives, on stories, suggests that the human brain “runs” on stories, that we remember information better and longer when it is presented in story form. So, give yourself the best chance for understanding and remembering the key ideas of the chapters, and read about college students like you who have learned important lessons from their mistakes and successes. The vignettes are designed to put a face on what you are learning, to make it more personalized and interesting. Instead of just telling you what works in college, these vignettes show you what works—and what does not.

## Chapter Content

Each of the nine chapters in this book is based on the latest research about success in college reading, study, and success. You will find that there are many examples of students’ work, charts and diagrams that enable you to see as well as read key concepts, and step-by-step instructions on how to complete college-level assignments in ways that lead to higher levels of academic achievement. As you read through the chapters, search for the strategies that seem best suited to your individual needs. We have provided a range of options for people with different learning styles, learning problems, college courses, and instructor expectations. As you read each chapter, keep asking yourself questions:

How does this apply to my situation now?  
Is it something I might use later on in another college course?  
What changes do I apparently need to make in my behavior?  
What am I learning, and how can I continue to make progress toward my goals?

## Improvement in Action

As you scan through the chapters, you will see shaded boxes throughout that we call “Improvement in Action.” Each of these numbered boxes asks you to do something that will help you solidify your understanding of the material and really interact with what you are reading. You may want to jot down your ideas directly in your textbook or, if your instructor recommends it, begin a learning log and write your responses there.

Remember that the key to success in college study is not simply to plow through your assignments. Even if you have used that approach with reasonable success previously, you will find that it seldom leads to positive outcomes in college. Why? Because much of the college course material you will encounter is too complex, abstract, and difficult to master using the “once over lightly” approach. The group of learners you are keeping company with in college is different from the other groups of students you have known. In those groups, participation was mandatory. Now that you are in college, the people who are there are the 45% who chose to be there and give college a try. As a result, expectations for your performance have risen. When you enrolled in college, you announced to the world that you wanted to pursue a professional career. Now you will need to make that career goal a priority.

One way of demonstrating your seriousness of purpose is to really work over your textbooks. College-level learners who take the time and trouble to interact with textbook material are far more likely to make steady, continuous improvement. That is why we call this feature of your textbook “Improvement in Action”—it is only by becoming involved in what you read and really making it part of you that you can make significant gains in your academic achievement at the college level and meet your goals.

## Voices of Successful Students

In our work with college students, we conduct interviews and survey students about those things that enabled them to be more successful. We include their advice and insights, stated in their own words, so that you can benefit from their experiences. Listen to their advice! It is worth thinking about because they were once in a situation similar to yours and made the best of their opportunity.

## Cooperative Learning Activity

Even though most people think of study and learning as an individual activity, learning also has a social dimension. If interaction with other people made no contribution to the learning process, then everyone would simply stay home and take correspondence courses instead of attending college. Lectures have their place, but you also need time to apply what you are learning and get feedback from others. That is why we have suggested a variety of activities that will give you the opportunity to work together with your peers under the guidance of an expert—the instructor for the course. Do not think of these cooperative learning activities as a time for casual conversation. They are designed to give you practical experience in working with

others in a professional setting. They are “on-the-job training” for the kind of group work you will be expected to do later on in your chosen profession.

## Self-Improvement Strategy

Improving your learning is strategic. In the “Self-Improvement Strategy” section of the chapter, we give you a helpful hint to try out and evaluate. Think of these strategies as the intellectual equivalent of going to basketball camp with a famous player. If you were in basketball camp, you would be hoping to learn some of the secrets to improving your game. That is what each self-improvement strategy is designed to do: to share some of the secrets to success in learning.

## Writing and Reflecting

Increasingly, experts who work with beginning college students have found that students can build and demonstrate their understanding of material better when they put it into their own words and strive to think more deeply about what they are learning and how it relates to them as individuals. As you go through your professional career, you will no doubt have instructors who require you to keep a journal, log, or observational notes. Often, this requirement is part of a writing course or an internship program, a time when you are required to put what you have learned into practice. Examples of internships include student teaching for an education major, working at a precinct for a criminology major, or working in industry for a business major. By keeping a journal or at least writing periodically about what you are learning, you will be using writing as a tool to improve your understanding. In fact, this view that writing can exert a positive influence on learning is so widely accepted among professors and other experts that it is sometimes called “writing to learn” or “writing across the curriculum (or the program).”

## Reading Selections

Reading in college will introduce you to a wide range of material. You might be reading the works of a great novelist at one moment, a science laboratory manual at another. You might be reading an ancient philosopher’s words on Monday and an essay on a current controversy from the *New York Times* on Friday. You might be assigned to read 50 pages of a sociology textbook during the week or to read and memorize two pages of conversation in a modern language class. With this wide range of reading material, you will need to become a flexible and efficient reader. To aid you in this process, we have collected a wide variety of reading selections. Some are taken from actual college-level textbooks. Some are excerpts from books or articles about how to succeed in college. Others are from professional journals or magazines. Still others (most of the longer selections) were written by noted authors from various fields. We provide this variety to give you practice in reading many different kinds of material.



## References

Each chapter also contains a complete list of the sources we consulted in writing the chapters. If you have a special interest in any of the sources and want to read more about a topic, be sure to consult your college library or visit your campus bookstore to examine these resources in greater detail.

## Supplemental Learning Activities

Your instructor will decide how to use the supplemental learning activities that appear in the back of your book. Most of them are designed to be completed in small groups while you are in class.

## Appended Material

In the two chapter appendixes, you will find several things that should be helpful to you. Chapter 2 Appendix is a self-assessment instrument so that you can keep a chart of your progress. Use it to keep track of your grades in the course and monitor your progress toward the goals you have set. Chapter 7 Appendix gives additional advice on using the resources at your library.

We have made every effort to fill this book with material that will be meaningful to you and useful in supporting your goal of completing a college education. We welcome your comments and suggestions about the book and will continue to do everything possible to make it a better learning tool for students. Write to us at the following address:

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