Peru State College
CATS: Center for Achievement and Transition Services

The Study Cycle

Do you have trouble building study time into your schedule? Do you find yourself waiting until the last minute to study for exams? The Study Cycle, adapted from Frank Christ's PLRS system by Saundra McGuire in her book *Teach Students How to Learn*, is a guide to help you build effective studying into your everyday life. On the surface, each step may seem obvious, but all too often students take shortcuts and miss important opportunities to benefit from the interplay of each step of the cycle. In the Study Cycle, each step builds on the previous one and distributes your learning throughout the semester, which is much more effective than waiting until the day before the test to study.

Step 1: Preview

Take a look at what you'll be covering during lecture before you go to class. This will help you gain a sense of the big picture and anticipate how concepts fit together. You will get more out of attending the lecture (step 2) if you already have some context for what you're about to learn, and you can come into class with questions that you expect will be answered.

Make sure to do the pre-class reading. Even if your teacher does not specifically assign reading, you can use the course schedule on the syllabus to find out what will be covered and preview the content. If you're pressed for time, it is okay to skim—focus on headings, introductions, and summary. If your professor provides you with learning objectives or PowerPoint slides ahead of time, make sure to preview those and maybe even print them out to take notes on. The important thing to keep in mind here is that neither skimming, reading, nor attending class is incredibly effective on its own, but the combination (and sometimes repetition) of the two results in good learning. If you've heard a friend say "I don't read for class because the professor covers everything in class," they're missing a huge opportunity to learn more from the lecture—meaning they'll need to study more later in order to learn the material.

Step 2: Attend class

Of course, going to class is an important step in the study cycle, but just being physically present isn't enough. Being attentive and engaged will help you get the most out of the experience. Class time is important, because this is when you get an understanding of the professor's expectations and areas of focus (e.g., what's going to be on the test), which will help you figure out what to focus on during your study sessions later (steps 3 and 4). It's also a great opportunity to gain insight and intuition from your instructor and from other students in your class through asking questions and taking part in discussions.

During class, **take notes** in a way that will be useful to you. Taking notes by hand can help you remember the information—especially if you try to paraphrase in your own words. Try to stay off your phone/computer during class, unless you need it for an assignment. Keep track of your questions, and if you don't get to ask them during class, make a plan to go to office hours or tutoring.

Step 3: Review

Take some time after class to go back over your notes. You don't have to spend a long time doing this, but the sooner you do it the better. By reviewing soon after class, while the material is still fresh, you can fill in gaps and figure out what you might need help with.

When you're reading back through your notes, make sure you're actively engaging with the material. Passively letting your eyes scan over the material won't actually help much. Instead, explain the material to yourself, summarize the key points, ask questions, and think about the big picture. Start to plan out how you might want to study the material you learned. If you've followed steps 1 and 2, this will be the third time you're engaging with this content. Repeated exposure to the material helps you remember and understand it more effectively.

Step 4: Study

Schedule several focused study sessions per week for each of your classes. These sessions don't have to be long; in fact, brief but intense study sessions tend to be more effective than trying to study for many hours at a time. Figure out how long you can stay focused and efficient—it may be just 20 to 30 minutes, but it will probably vary depending on the material—and then plan study sessions of this length throughout your week. By spreading your studying over time, you're studying much more effectively (this is called "distributed practice") and won't have to try to do less-effective marathon study sessions before the exam (also known as "massed practice"). Distributed practice helps you learn the material at a deeper level because you have more time to process it, see connections, and ask questions.

When you are planning your study sessions, it's important to set specific and realistic goals. Having a plan for what you're doing during the study session will help you use your time more efficiently. For more information about how to structure your study sessions check out this handout about intense study sessions. While studying, make sure to use active learning techniques. For example, you could work problems, create a concept map, or explain concepts out loud. In between your short study sessions take a break that will refresh you. After a productive study session, **reward yourself**.

Step 5: Check

The last step is the one that a lot of people forget about. It's important to check in with yourself to make sure what you're doing is working and being open to changing your techniques if it's not. After all, you wouldn't want to spend a lot of time doing something that is not helping you learn. To make sure that your studying is effective, take a step back on a regular basis and ask yourself some metacognitive questions. Practice self-testing on a regular basis. Discuss what you're learning with classmates. Check in with the learning objectives and make sure you are meeting them.

Works consulted

Christ, F.L (1997). *Seven steps to better management of your study time.* Clearwater, FL: H&H.

McGuire, S.Y. & McGuire, S. (2016). *Teach Students How to Learn: Strategies You Can Incorporate in Any Course to Improve Student Metacognition, Study Skills, and Motivation.* Stylus Publishing, LLC.