Study Tips For Students from Paul Haber (January 2012)

--Develop your powers of concentration. Read and write notes for extended periods of time. Above all else, resist the powerful temptation to browse the internet, check email, text, chat on the phone. That does not mean you cannot or should not take breaks. But, let breaks be breaks. Take a walk, alone. Continue to mull what you are reading or writing. Breaks with technology are not your friends; rather, they break concentration. Solitude is your friend. Solitude is an endangered species. Help yourself and help the world by practicing it. Don't feel discouraged if you find it uncomfortable. Solitude is sometimes uncomfortable – this is universal. If you feel uncomfortable, it means you are doing something right. Persevere. (For a useful read on how our addiction to “staying in touch” undermines us and the broader culture, see “Body-Checked by a Beep” by Aaron Lake Smith).

--Developing your studying/thinking skills is like working out at the gym. It is about building muscles and flexibility. It is also useful to change up your routine from time to time so as to outmaneuver plateaus.

--You must take notes. My best take is that there is not one right way to do this. You have to develop your own way(s) of doing this, finding which way(s) work well for you. I myself sometimes write down what is being said in the reading; that’s right, I literally write down the words verbatim. This helps me to understand what the author is saying. I also sometimes, when moved, will paraphrase what the author has said in a passage or set of pages or chapter in my own words. This really helps me to “get it” and when I cannot do this well it helps me understand that I still don’t “get it.” If you go through this process on sections of the reading that you feel and think are important and don’t feel like you “get it” this almost always makes for a very effective question to bring to class.

--Write down things you want to share with the professor or TA, in class or office hours. Distinguish between clarifying questions and analytical comments and questions.

--Work on major presentations and papers/research projects throughout the length of the semester, or as much of the time as possible. DO NOT WAIT until the end and cram it through. While studying on a week-to-week basis, be thinking about your project or presentation and how this particular reading might relate to it. Do not overdo this: all good things can turn against you if you do them dogmatically. Sometimes it if a great idea to just read what you are reading or think what you are thinking or feel what you are feeling without relating it to some other purpose. But, I would argue that for most of us it is a good idea to be pondering semester projects and letting your week-to-week studying feed them.

Your semester project in this class is to understand the Occupy Movement today in historical and comparative terms. So, be reading about Occupy as we make our way through the historical readings. When you come up with insights or questions, bring them to class. This will not only help your understanding and your paper but will contribute to class and in so doing contribute to your participation grade as well.

(over)
--Especially in smaller classes that invite participation: participate! Make contributions – make the class a better class with your questions and comments. More is not always better. Quality is your goal. If you have questions or concerns about your participation, come see me in office hours. If you cannot make my office hours, then make an appointment with me.

The biggest obstacle to class participation is fear of looking stupid. Work through this. It takes courage sometimes. Reach for that courage and then let it help you to move through the fear to the participation. You will feel better for doing it. And, you will get a better grade.

--Don’t expect all that you read to come to you – sometimes you have to move toward the author and take him or her on their own terms, not your own. Students are all the time complaining that authors are “dry” or “too wordy” or “too abstract.” So often, this is a mistake. Authors will sometimes speak your language, that is, they will communicate in a language and a sensibility that you are familiar with. But, sometimes, they do not and you have to make an effort to understand them on their terms.

This is an inter-cultural experience. Would you expect Mexicans to act like gringos when you are traveling in Mexico? Well, some gringos do, and that is a problem, for everybody, not least of all the gringo, who misses the opportunity to learn how other people do things differently. Don’t be a cultural snob or culturally small-minded. Expand your mind! Try out different ways of thinking! Reading positions and ways of thinking that are unfamiliar is a way to make this happen.

--Too many students whine that more radical positions are “biased” while not making the same observation of more moderate thinkers or thinkers who take positions more similar to their own.

Moderate politics is every bit as “biased” as radical politics, at least if what we mean by biased is that they have a point of view, that they have unexamined assumptions, from which rational arguments and data collection proceed. All writings express a point of view, and this point of view informs the work in profound ways. There is no way around this! It is not a problem. The task is to discern the point of view. Sometimes authors help you to do this; other times they do not. In classes that encourage you to actually think about what you are reading rather than just regurgitate what you have read on exams, bring your observations of bias to class discussion. Above all, do not accuse those with whom you do not agree as being biased in a bad way and those with whom you agree as being objective. This is lame.

--Study as much as you possibly can. Recent research strongly suggests that most students do not do much homework, and the amount of homework is on the decline. If you do not work hard outside of class your class participation will not be of high quality. There is no way around this!

--Ok, your turn: add to my list.