

9 SUCCESSFUL STUDYING

by Steve Douglass

THE SECRET: THE 80-20 RULE

I believe there are a limited number of important skills necessary for success in school. I call it the 80/20 Rule. When I was an undergraduate student I evaluated the results from my study activities. I discovered that about 80 percent of my results came from about 20 percent of my activity. The other 80 percent of my activity contributed only about 20 percent to my results in learning and grades.

Would you like to have more fun at poly?
Would you like to get better grades?

I can probably guess your answer to both of these questions. Who wouldn't want both? The problem is that students often mistakenly believe that the two are mutually exclusive, meaning you can't have it both ways.

I disagree. I guarantee that if you apply these simple principles, you can have both. Join me in a discussion in the next few pages of how to do just that. Learn how to become what I call an 80/20 Student.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

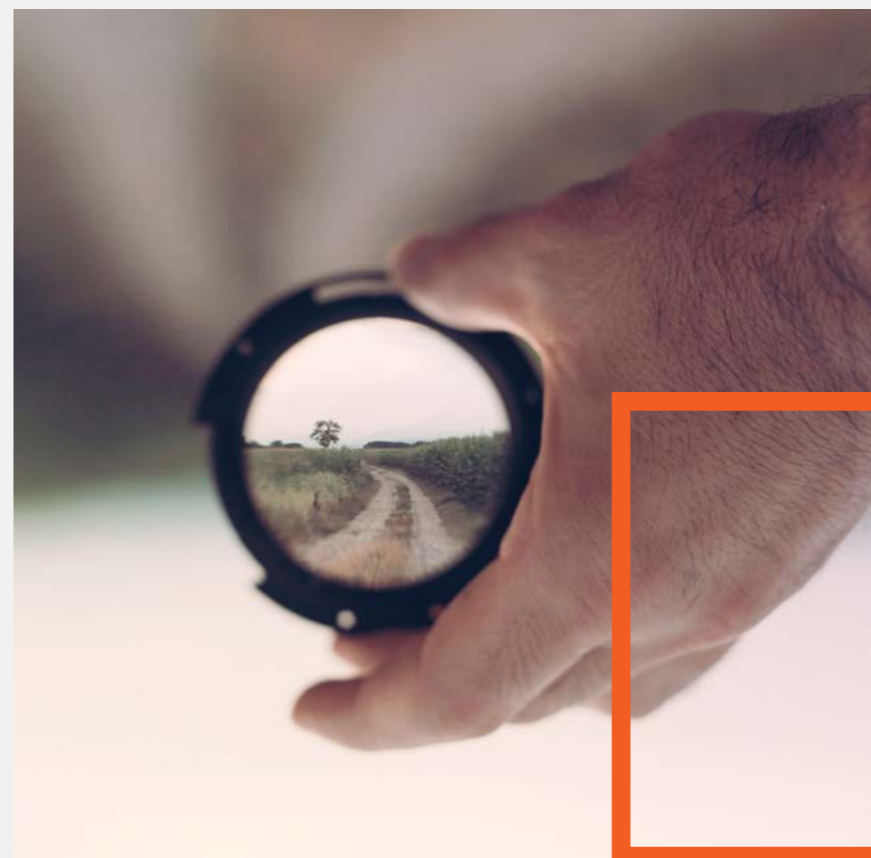
is to work smarter, not harder. The trick is to learn the right 20 percent. That doesn't mean you'll do 80 percent less work. I'm suggesting you concentrate more on the 20 percent of the activity that will yield the greatest benefit. Cut out some of the non-productive activity in the learning process and focus on that which is productive. Do that and you will learn more and get better grades.

THE SECOND PRINCIPLE

is to always attend lectures. Sound simple? There's a strong correlation between students who skip lectures and those who drop out of university. Attending lectures is the best way to learn what you're supposed to learn, what your lecturer will put in the exam, and what's expected of you in your homework.

THE THIRD PRINCIPLE

is to determine the objectives of each course. The biggest mistake students make is that they don't know what they're supposed to learn in their lectures. Rarely will you discover the objective by reading the textbook. Usually the professor reveals that in lectures, most often during the first week. Knowing the objectives will provide a framework for your studies for the entire semester.



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Let's review: An 80/20 Student has learned to work smarter, not just harder.

He or she has learned those few crucial principles for success in school and diligently applies them. The 80/20 Student attends every lecture and learns the course objectives during the first week of school.



LISTEN WITH 80/20 AGGRESSIVENESS

Think of the word SAFE as an acrostic for how to listen aggressively during class.

SCAN: The secret to aggressive listening is that your mind is like a radar. You're alert, curious, and aware of what's being said and what's going on around you.

ASK: Constantly ask, "Is this valuable? How does this fit the objective? Do I need to probe deeper?"

FOCUS: When you determine something is worth further attention, zero in on it. Record it and highlight it.

EXPLORE: Though we're talking about aggressive listening, you may need to use your mouth too. Ask questions to clarify a point. Examine and probe the topic carefully in order to gain full understanding.

DOING ASSIGNMENTS RIGHT

The first principle of doing assignments is also the most obvious. Always turn in your assignments, even if it's not completed. Partial credit is always better than no credit. It shows your professor what you know. Just as you need to listen aggressively in class, you also need to read aggressively.

The second principle is to again use the SAFE (Scan, Ask, Focus, Explore) acrostic to help you do just that. **Scan** the material. To get the big picture read the back cover, the table of contents, and the preface or introduction. These tips will help you determine the purpose of the book.

The second step is **Ask**. What's important? How does this chapter relate to the overall purpose of the book? Is this incident a side road or is it central to the plot or thesis? Is this character important, or only making a cameo appearance?

The third step is to **Focus**. Underline key parts of the chapters or text. Put an asterisk or arrow by key points. Concentrate on the portions that will yield the greatest benefit to your understanding in class, in assignments, and on exams.

The fourth step is **Explore**. Look for information beyond the book such as facts or events that give you a historical context for the book. Select some unfamiliar words and look them up in a dictionary. You might want to develop some questions for class.





WHERE'S THE FUN?

By now, you are likely asking where the fun part comes in. Glad you asked. Here's one way to incorporate fun into your studying. Set a goal to complete a certain amount of reading or doing a number of problems.

When you've accomplished your goal, reward yourself by taking a break and doing something you enjoy. When I finish an assignment, I might take a coffee break, read the newspaper, or take a walk. You might want to talk to a friend, email someone, or listen to music. The breaks don't have to be long – usually 10 or 15 minutes should be long enough to refresh you.

One thing I promised you was that you'd have more fun. By employing the 80/20 rule you give priority to the activities that promise the highest benefit. That often frees up more time for you to do other things you enjoy. But sometimes there's no getting around an activity we don't want to do. Wouldn't it be great if we could learn to like those things too?

Remember why you're doing what you're doing. This will help you be motivated naturally. Often it helps to enlist a friend. When possible, do the things you don't like with someone you do like. For example, do you want to be physically fit, but hate to work out? Find a friend to do stomach crunches with you. Do you want to lose a few kilos? Find a friend to go walking with you.

LIKING WHAT YOU DO

THE REAL SOURCE OF SUCCESS

We've talked about being 80/20 students and determining objectives, and listening and reading aggressively, and taking good notes. There was a time when I thought that doing those things well was the source of my happiness. When I entered university, my goal was to do well. I was elected vice president of the class, I made excellent grades, and I won the outstanding first-year award.

When I achieved that goal, I set my sights even higher. There was one trophy that was the most prestigious at my university, and I decided to try and become the second undergraduate to win it. I worked hard, was involved in the student government, played basketball, and went out with a lot of girls. At the end of my third year it was announced that I had won the award, and my parents flew out for the ceremony.

On the night of the ceremony, I'll never forget these words that went through my mind with each step I took toward the podium to accept my award: "So what? Big deal!" I thought, "If even in the moment of success it's no big deal, then it's going to be

a very empty life." That got me thinking, "What is the source of satisfaction in life?"

I had success but no happiness. The true secret to happiness goes far beyond just getting good marks, or playing basketball, or winning a big award. And that related to the rest of my story.

It all began the summer after my third year. A girl I was going out with spent a lot of time with a group of Christians, so I hung around with them too. For one thing, they were an attractive group of people who played volleyball, which I liked.

Those students told me about having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They talked as if God was giving them guidance every day, giving them peace of mind in tough circumstances, giving

them a sense of achievement in life. They were living life in a full, very desirable way. I was looking to find satisfaction by achieving different goals, but I wasn't finding it.

I hadn't considered that perhaps God had something to say to me about how I lived my life. I wasn't satisfied with life because I was doing my own thing. My Christian friends told me that God had a plan for my life, but I didn't know what that plan was because I was too busy chasing my own goals. They told me that God calls this attitude sin and I needed to accept Christ as God's remedy for that sin.

A couple of nights later, while lying wide-awake in my bed, I prayed: "God, I need you. I open the door of my life and receive Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord. Thank you for forgiving my sins. Please take control of

my life and make me the person you want me to be. I don't want to continue running from one goal or experience to another looking for happiness. I want you to give me your direction and satisfaction as you have given it to my friends. Amen."

Well, I didn't float off the bed, but I did get a good night's sleep. Slowly, over the following weeks, my life began to change. For instance, I began to show more love

towards my parents and more concern for others, not just myself. But I really noticed a change when I returned to my next year in school. I fully realised that God had come to live within me. He was giving me power to cope with my circumstances.

There's just one more aspect I'd like to talk about... taking those exams. It's the one unavoidable aspect of school life that causes stress for so many.

PREPARING FOR EXAMS



The first sign of a problem while preparing for an exam is worry. Worry robs us of energy, focus and motivation.

If we can eliminate worries, or at least control them, then we're in a much better position to do well on our tests. There are three ways I know to deal with worry.

The *first* is to delete the causes. What causes you anxiety when you are studying? Too much noise? Then move to a quieter place. Procrastination? Catch up with your studies a couple of nights before. That way you can save the final night before the exam to review and get a good night sleep.

The *second* way to deal with worry is to displace thoughts. Suppose you wake up at three in the morning and you're worried about an exam. What do you do? How about getting up and studying for an hour? Doing something productive might allow you to sleep better when you finally do go back to bed.

Another way to displace negative thoughts is to do something physically active. Work out. Take a quick walk or a nice run. Another idea is to think positive thoughts.

For example, I might worry about the exam having surprise questions that I'm not prepared to answer. But I can shove those thoughts aside by reminding myself that I've taken many exams and I've handled surprise questions before.

The *third* option is to treat the symptoms. Keep things in perspective. Think of one final exam that causes you the most anxiety. Now think of the worst thing that could happen. If you've prepared, then likely the worst grade you could get is a c. And, if you've been applying what we've been talking about, then you'll likely do no worse than a b. How bad is that really?

THE COMPLETE 80-20 STUDENT

What does it take to be an 80/20 student? **Remember the rule:** 80 percent of the benefit from poly can be gained by doing the right 20 percent of the activity well.

By applying this simple principle to your classes, your homework, your exams, and other areas of your life, you can have a more enjoyable poly experience.

Who wouldn't want to get better grades and have more fun?

