

4. HOW TO STUDY ANY SUBJECT

As students we have to study various subjects. We are naturally good at some subjects and at some we are not. Regardless, as educated citizens we have to know these subjects. Our development should encompass a wide variety of subjects. College is the most important place where we can be exposed to all these subjects very easily. We must learn these subjects and develop a life-long habit of learning new subjects. This way we keep growing intellectually and can tackle the changing world successfully.

There is a saying in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India, “Whatever the knowledge is in a book, it is someone else’s money.” When we study any subject we have to make the knowledge our own. Then it becomes ‘our own money’. The way to do this is really simple. Any subject or a book is divided into sections. We have discussed how to “divide and conquer” in the previous chapter. Regardless of the course, each section is divided into paragraphs. So whatever we learn is given to us in digestible chunks. We have to make these sections our own. We should not remember isolated formulas or lines but the entire section should be assimilated in our mind completely.

The first step is that we remain focused. Concentration can accomplish anything. Concentration gives us understanding. Concentration gives us insight. A common complaint is “I can’t concentrate. My mind wanders. I am physically in class, but I am daydreaming.” We have to train our minds to come back to the task at hand, regardless of its habit of going away from the task.

We have to be mindful. The techniques of tranquility discussed in a later Chapter are a proven help to become mindful. We have to develop an attitude that the subject or topic we want to study is easy and we can do it. This attitude is developed first with basic confidence in ourselves, second by focusing, and third by spending as much time as it is necessary to understand the topic. For focusing, we must ask ourselves, “Do I really want to come back to this topic again and start all over? Isn’t the time precious? At this time I have assigned myself to this task, I must give my 100% to it. Anything else can wait until I come back to it after the next few hours.” A friendly attitude to ourselves and our fellow being – teachers and classmates, tutors and staff helps us to focus. If there is something urgent to take care of, we must take care of it and postpone our study until a time when we can become quiet. If we feel sleepy, we should take a short nap before we study. If we are inspired, we can easily focus. We must read inspirational literature in our spare or relaxation time to inspire us. We should never burden ourselves with unnecessary things, and must be selective of the things in the world, from the point of achieving our own goal. A traveler with a light baggage can go far without getting tired.

When we study a subject in school, a teacher makes (or tries to make) the subject alive. It is absolutely essential to be punctual in the class, participate fully in the class, try to answer any questions the teacher asks, raising questions if a point made by the teacher is not clear. The teacher brings out the ‘hidden mysteries’ of a subject. Subtle points made in class, logical connections, connections with day-to-day life experiences, motivational words of a teacher make the subject become meaningful to us personally. The

encouraging words of teachers, personal assistance, solving our difficulties, assessing our understanding by homework and tests make the subject easily accessible. It would be so difficult to do all these things if we have to do everything by ourselves.

The second step is to read the text or handouts and find the goal of the section we want to assimilate. We should write it down in a few lines after we have seen the section once. Then, list the concepts or skills discussed in the section. This will form a summary of each paragraph. After completing the section, link all these ideas logically by connecting the different ideas from the beginning until the end of the section, just like beads are strung on a string to form a necklace. It is easier to carry all beads as a necklace than to carry isolated beads in the palm. In the same manner, all ideas of the section linked logically stay in mind as a picture, whereas isolated ideas and formulas are easily forgotten. If there are important examples given in that section, list them. This will form the summary of the section. As we write the ideas in our own words, the ideas become crystal clear.

The third step is to do homework on time. We should give up the 'student syndrome' of waiting until the last minute before the exam or the homework deadline. Organization of our daily activities in the morning helps to allot the required time for homework. Otherwise, we are always in a rush to take care of something in a haphazard manner. Doing the homework soon after writing the summary makes the subject our own regardless of our natural liking. The CCPM of a course discussed in the previous chapter is very effective in avoiding the student syndrome.

The fourth step is to develop test taking skills. By asking questions of ourselves on each section and answering them makes our understanding deeper and we are able to answer any question on the test. Besides, as a preparation for tests, teachers give practice tests or problem sets or review tests from test banks on paper or online. We need to do the testing ourselves weekly whether there is a test announced or not. If necessary, we have to time ourselves while taking the practice tests. In this manner, the day before the test nothing much remains to be done. Only a review of the summaries prepared and doing a few important problems makes us ready for the test. We must make a habit of not reading anything related to the test once we are in school for the test. Our mind delivers what is needed when it is our own knowledge.

Benefits: The student is guaranteed to get an A in the course since, as the summaries develop, they provide a very good way to review for a test. The folder of all section summaries becomes a portfolio of the course taken, is also useful for brush ups in future, and for graduating seniors to take for an interview to the graduate advisor, who will be impressed and who will know how to guide the student and how the student writes. Some of the students have actually done so when they went to Graduate School.