

HELPING YOUR CHILD WITH ORGANIZATION AND STUDY SKILLS

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INTRODUCTION

Students need the right tools (such as notebooks and assignment books) and basic study skills (such as note taking and summarizing) to be successful in school. Some students are able to “intuit” and develop these strategies on their own. They can create systems for organizing, processing, and comprehending what they read or hear in class; planning homework and long-term assignments; studying for tests; and determining effective test-taking strategies. Many students, however, need direct, systematic instruction to develop these skills. Weaknesses in reading, writing, and organization skills, or weak attention may affect some students’ ability to self-design and independently apply study strategies. These students can learn study skills, but they need specific instruction and sufficient practice to do so.

Through my work as an educator for over thirty years, I have developed a flexible study skills model that can be taught in tutorials and small groups, as well as incorporated into regular classrooms. Parts of the model can also be used by you, the parent, to help your child become an independent learner.

THE STUDY SKILLS MODEL

The first part of the model (The Key Notebook Routine) addresses organization strategies for notebooks, materials, assignments, study space, and calendars. The second part (The Key Three Routine) addresses three “foundation” study skills: reading and listening for main ideas, applying two-column note taking, and summarizing. The final part of the model combines these foundation skills for building textbook, testing, and research/report-writing skills. This model has been used to train thousands of teachers in public and private schools throughout the U. S. Many schools have adopted this model on a team, grade, or school-wide basis.

The portions of the model which are most useful for parents include:

- organization strategies
- reading and listening for main ideas
- note-taking skills

Suggestions for helping your child with these skills are included below.

ORGANIZATION STRATEGIES

The Key Notebook Routine

The Key Notebook Routine is an ongoing system for filing, organizing, and studying school papers and materials. The Key Notebook Routine consists of two parts:

- Working notebook
- Reserve files

Parents can help students set up a Working Notebook and transfer material from the Working Notebook to the Reserve Files on a regular basis.

Working Notebook

The Working Notebook is the main tool your child will use for all of his classes and homework. It holds all the papers and information needed each day. Any three-ring binder can serve as a Working Notebook. However, it is recommended that you use a nylon, zippered type because it tends to hold up better and last longer. The ring size should be 1.5 to 2 inches in diameter. Your child's Working Notebook should contain:

- a portable, three-hole punch
- a zippered pouch with three holes to hold highlighters, pencils, pens, clips, "sticky notes", and other small supplies
- a monthly calendar
- four section dividers for each subject labeled "*homework*", "*notes*", "*handouts*", and "*quizzes/tests*"
- an assignment book
- several plastic page protectors to keep reference papers such as a copy of the class schedule, math facts, spelling list, etc.

These items are available at most office supply stores in a three-hole punched format so they can be inserted easily into the notebook. This is important, because if the items are not attached to the notebook, they will get lost in backpacks or left at home or school.

On a daily basis, your child should date, three-hole punch, and file all of his school papers under the appropriate divider for each subject. Your child should also note assignments in detail in the assignment book. The monthly calendar is used to note upcoming tests, quizzes, or long-term projects.

Reserve Files

Reserve Files are used for storing completed work and material no longer needed for class. The files usually stay at home, but if the teacher is willing to use the system in class, they may be kept at school. They may be stored in a file cabinet, a plastic or cardboard file box, or a portable file box. There should be one section of the files for each subject. Reserve Files provide a single place to organize and store finished work. They also keep the working notebook from getting too full.

On a regular basis, preferably at the end of each week, your child should remove all notes, homework, and other papers not needed for class the next week and clip them together by subject. Your child should then review the material, make a list of the main points covered in class that week, and write a summary in his own words for each subject. The next step is to attach the list and summary to the clipped-together work and to store the packet in the Reserve Files. After several weeks, your child's Reserve Files will contain a series of packets, filed by subject, that can be used to review and study for a unit or semester test.

The goal with this system is to eventually have your child apply these strategies independently, but many children will need significant help and practice with an adult before they can do this on their own. It might be helpful to contact your child's teachers for their input about which papers can be culled out of the working notebook, and which should remain for the next week.

Reference Pages for the Working Notebook

Plastic sheet protectors can be used to create a reference section in the Working Notebook for keeping information that your child needs to reference on a frequent basis. Some examples of items for reference pages include:

- a personal spelling list of commonly used words that are particularly difficult for your child
- a list of transition words and phrases that will improve the quality of your child's writing assignments (e.g., words such as however, for example, finally, therefore, in conclusion, another, first, second, etc.)
- math facts
- charts or graphs given in class (such as a time line of events for social studies or a periodic table for science)
- how-to lists (such as how to answer an essay question, how to organize your notebook) and templates (such as formats for science experiments)
- a copy of the class schedule

General reference pages, such as a class schedule, can be kept at the beginning or end of the Working Notebook. Reference pages that are subject specific can be kept in a subject section.

The combination of the Working Notebook and Reserve Files makes it easier for your child to find exactly the papers they need and to avoid losing important papers. The system also eliminates the overstuffed notebooks and backpacks that typically develop as the school year progresses.

Organizing Homework, Study Space and Time

Organizing Homework

A good assignment book is essential for completing homework successfully. Sometimes schools provide a standard assignment book, and office supply stores usually carry a variety of student assignment books at the start of the school year. Many of these products have been designed quite well. However, some are too bulky, do not have three-holes so they can be kept in a notebook, or do not provide enough space to note assignments, teacher/parent comments, or signatures. If you cannot find a good, pre-printed assignment book, you may want to consider creating your own assignment book by designing a daily assignment page, photocopying it, and binding it or stapling the pages together. A good assignment page should include the following components:

- Three holes so it can be kept in the Working Notebook
- Plenty of room to write detailed homework assignments of every subject
- A space for a daily, teacher/parent comment or signature
- A place to note the due date for each assignment
- A place to note that an assignment has been completed
- A place to note and plan long-term assignments, projects, and upcoming tests

Study Space

Routines about when and where homework is completed are essential. Although most students will not admit it, they know they benefit from structure for completing homework. The structure can be imposed by you or by teachers.

Your child should have an identified study space in the home. Preferably, the space should be used solely for school work. It can be in your child's room, a quiet area of the living room, or even a walk-in closet. The space should be free of visual and auditory distractions (including games, TV, radio, and other children). It should have a clear work surface, good light, and a comfortable yet supportive chair. All necessary supplies should be on hand before the child starts, including a dictionary, pencils, paper, ruler, and calculator.

On the first day of school, you should establish a routine with your child for completing homework. The routine needs to reflect your child's individual learning style. For example, some students with attention weaknesses work best if they spend no more than fifteen minutes on a subject, move to another assignment for fifteen minutes, and then return to the original assignment (rather than work continuously on the same assignment). Some students do better if they spend a half-hour after school on homework, then take a break to play or eat dinner, then complete the homework.

While the best time for completing homework differs for each student, it's important to establish what it is and make it a routine.

Organizing Time

Starting in the third or fourth grade, your child should be taught and encouraged to use daily schedule books and calendars. By posting a large "family" calendar in a common area, all members of your family can enter and check events, such as sports practices, family outings, and school dates. This is a good model to learn from.

Also, encourage your child to use the monthly calendar in his working notebook. Monthly calendars are important for reminding you and your child of upcoming tests, long-term project due dates, and special activities. Items and events such as these should be noted on the monthly calendar during the school day, and checked by the parent each day. Pencil should be used because dates may change.

A daily planner can be used to sketch out how homework, play time, club meetings, and the like can be worked into each day. This helps avoid the conflict that often occurs about when to do homework, since you will reach a decision together based on the available hours in a day. It also shows your child that his free time is valued and will be included in his schedule.

It is important not to make assumptions about how well your child can tell time without a digital clock, understand and follow class schedules, or sense how time flows daily, weekly, and monthly. Some students have difficulty with the simplest aspects of time and planning, and these weaknesses may not be readily apparent. I once knew a very bright teenager with learning disabilities who thought that “quarter after four” meant 4:25 (because a quarter is twenty-five cents), and another who thought that on March 30 he had a month to complete a report that was due on April 3 (because it was “next month”).

Communicating with Teachers

Too often, teachers claim that parents are not involved enough with their children’s school work, and parents claim that teachers do not provide enough information for them to help their children. To avoid this situation, communicate with your child’s teachers as soon as possible – preferably before the first day of school – and maintain that communication throughout the year.

Ask teachers what organization structures they provide, what they expect from students, and how you can help your child organize materials and study effectively. Ask the teacher to write homework assignments, with a lot of detail, on a blackboard for your child to copy so you will know what the homework is and how it is to be completed. Be willing to check, sign, and return a daily homework sheet to maintain communication between you and the teacher. If you think your child is spending too much or too little time on homework, ask the teacher to suggest how long each assignment should take to complete, then note back to the teacher how long it actually took. This will help you and the teacher have a better understanding of your child’s homework needs.

STUDY SKILLS

The Key Three Routine

The Key Three Routine is a flexible program that can be used to teach and practice comprehension and study strategies in grades 4 through 12. The program is best used in content classrooms, but it can also be used as a supplemental program for students with

learning difficulties. The following elements of The Key Three Routine may be helpful for parents who are assisting their children with homework.

READING AND LISTENING FOR MAIN IDEAS

Many students are not active readers or listeners. Though they hear what the teacher says and read the words on a page, they do not fully or accurately process the information. These students often make statements such as, “I listened to the teacher, but I didn’t remember it for the test”, or, “I read the chapter twice, but I couldn’t answer the questions in class the next day.”

In order to be active learners and remember information, students need to:

- listen and read for meaning
- distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information
- organize details for easy sorting, prioritizing, and studying

The key to applying these strategies is learning how to recognize main ideas and formulate them in your own words. Although this appears to be a basic skill that should be taught in school, the fact is that many teachers focus more on teaching content than on teaching specific learning skills and strategies such as main ideas. Also, as the student moves from grade to grade, teachers tend to assume that he has already learned these strategies in an earlier grade. You can help your child develop main idea skills.

We use main idea skills everyday. For example, we can easily find items in the supermarket because products are arranged in main idea categories, such as dairy, bakery, and produce. We know to tune in to the second half of a news broadcast to hear the weather because news stories are grouped into main idea categories, such as national news, local news, sports and weather.

Children in primary grades can begin to identify main ideas by categorizing lists of objects and words. As students progress from grades three to five, they can learn to discern main ideas at the paragraph level. Over time, students learn to apply main ideas to longer, multi-paragraph material – ranging from a page in a sixth-grade textbook to a twenty-page college-level thesis paper. But sometimes students have difficulty with this skill because they cannot “chunk”, or sort, information into units of main ideas. Instead, they become overwhelmed by details.

Identifying main ideas is the most basic study skill, and it is needed in order to take notes, summarize, and apply textbook skills. You can help your child by pointing out tangible examples of details grouped by main ideas, such as the supermarket example noted above. For example, how is the food or dishware in the kitchen cabinets organized? How are the clothes stored in dresser drawers? How are non-fiction books sorted in a library? If you feel you are able to provide more advanced instruction to your child in main idea skills, you can use the following progression as a guide:

Categorizing

The most basic main idea task is to identify the category that applies to a list of words. For example, *fruit* is the main idea for a list that includes *apple*, *pear*, *peach*, and *banana*. The thinking process that a student uses to come up with the answer (*fruit*) includes holding one detail in working memory (*apple*) long enough to compare it to the next detail (*pear*), then determining what the two have in common. As the student adds each new detail (*peach*, *banana*), he compares it to the previous items to test against the main idea (*fruit*) for accuracy. This thinking process occurs in a millisecond. Most of us are not even aware we are following these steps. You want to explain this process to your child so he understands how to find the main idea.

Main Ideas in Paragraphs: The Topic Sentence

Once students can categorize individual words or items, the next step is recognizing and formulating the main ideas in a single paragraph. This is a basic skill needed to read for meaning. Paragraphs tend to begin with a topic sentence that states the paragraph's main idea. The rest of the paragraph conveys details that support this main idea. Students should be encouraged to search for the topic sentence as they read. They should also be encouraged to use topic sentences when writing their own paragraphs.

Sometimes the topic sentence is not the first sentence in the paragraph. It may be in the middle or at the end of a paragraph. Sometimes the main idea is not even stated; rather, it must be inferred by reading the detail sentences.

When he is reading, ask your child to underline or highlight the main idea if it is stated in a topic sentence. If the main idea must be inferred, ask your child to write it in his own words in the margin or on a piece of paper. This strategy will eventually enable your child to highlight and take margin notes in textbooks.

Lecture material can also be grouped into main ideas. Some teachers list main ideas before presenting to the class, which helps students chunk the information into smaller, more manageable units. Other teachers present detailed information without main idea cues. In this case, students need to infer the main ideas, which can be more difficult. If your child has difficulty determining main ideas, you should consider asking the teacher to supply a list of main ideas before a lecture. By reviewing the list with your child ahead of time, he will be better able to follow the lecture.

Main Ideas in Multi-Paragraph Material: A Hierarchy

Many reading assignments, such as textbook chapters, contain a hierarchy of main ideas and sub-main ideas. For example, a chapter title is the chapter's overall main idea. Chapter sections, usually marked by bold-faced section headings, are the sub-main ideas. Finally, each paragraph within a section has a main idea.

Before reading a chapter, have your child note the main idea and sub-main ideas by writing down the chapter title and bold-faced section headings from the chapter. This breaks the reading assignment into manageable units. Your child can then read each paragraph within a section and note its main idea. “Micro-uniting” a longer reading assignment in this way creates smaller, more manageable units and helps with comprehension.

Also, knowing the main ideas before a lesson or lengthy reading assignment gives students a “hook” to hang the details. It enables them to anticipate what they will be hearing or reading. You can ask your child’s teacher for a list of the main ideas he or she will be covering in advance, or you can sometimes pull them out of the textbook using the headings.

One way for your child to practice identifying main ideas is to create titles for articles in the newspaper. Most papers have sections with one-paragraph stories. Often, they are abbreviated international or national news items. Clip out the story without its title and have your child read it. Then have your child pretend he is the news reporter who must write title that conveys the main idea. This is a good way for your child to learn current events while practicing an important study skill.

Helpful Hints for Locating Main Ideas

1. To identify a main idea that is stated, your child should first answer the questions below.

- What is the one subject the author talks about throughout the paragraph? The answer to this question identifies the topic.
- What is the author saying about this topic? The answer to this question identifies the main idea.
- What details support the main idea? The answer to this question identifies the important details.

Next, your child should find and underline the topic sentence that states the main idea. If the main idea must be inferred because there is no topic sentence, your child should write out the main idea in his own words in the margin next to the paragraph.

2. Your child should make sure all the details refer to the topic sentence (or his main idea in the margin if there is no stated topic sentence).

3. Your child can double-check the main idea by asking if what they have underlined or written is too general or too specific.

NOTE TAKING SKILLS

Note taking is a way for students to record information from a lecture or reading assignment. It enables them to retrieve the information easily at a later time for study purposes.

Students are active listeners when taking notes because they are processing information in their own words. However, note taking (especially from lectures) is a difficult task because it requires the integration of listening, comprehension, sequencing, eye-hand coordination, writing, and spelling skills. Students can feel overwhelmed when they must take notes and, in some cases, they may even develop a fear of note taking.

It is important for you to stress the value to your child of consistently taking and using notes. Many students want to do the least amount of schoolwork in the shortest amount of time. They believe that as long as they understand a lecture or reading assignment, their memory will serve them and notes are not necessary. Sooner or later, this strategy is sure to fail.

It is easier for students to learn note taking skills from written sources, because they can go back over the information several times, and at a pace that is slower taking lecture notes. Therefore, taking notes from reading is the easiest way to learn note taking.

Two-Column Note Taking Method

Once students know how to recognize and formulate main ideas, they can learn to take notes that include important details. Encourage your child to take notes using the two-column method described below. This model is an adaptation of a note taking method developed at Cornell University for college students (Palk, W., *How to Study in College*, 1962. Boston, Houghton Mifflin)

- Draw a line down a sheet of paper, with one-third of the page on the left, and two-thirds of the page on the right.
- Write the main idea of each paragraph on the left side.
- List details on the right side of the page.

The two-column note taking method visually separates information into main ideas and details. By placing the details to the right of the main ideas, students can easily see which details support which main ideas. In contrast, information noted in a linear format (such as outlining) appears as a stream of facts, with no visual way to distinguish main ideas from details.

The two-column note taking format also makes it easier for students to use notes to prepare for a test. For example, you can ask your child to cover the details on the right side of the page with a sheet of paper, look at the main ideas in the left column, and turn them into study questions. This challenges the student to recall the details to answer the question. If necessary, he can lift the cover to review. Similarly, your child can cover the main ideas and use the details to recall the major points.

Some hints for effective note taking:

- Use as few words as possible – do not write full sentences.
- Use abbreviations.
- Keep lots of space on the page as you take notes: skip lines between details and leave extra space to add information later.

Once students learn and master the mechanics of two-column note taking by from written material, they can try taking notes from lectures. It is a difficult skill to learn, and you can help your child prepare by emphasizing the following sub-skills.

Abbreviation Skills

Many educators (and parents!) assume that most middle and high school students know how to use common abbreviations (e.g., Mr. for Mister, w/ for with). However, many students do not automatically abbreviate. Have your child practice with abbreviation skills. It can be fun, and doesn't require much time. All you need to do is ask your child how to abbreviate words when you are writing or talking together. Frequent practice is important.

Word Economy

Many students are tempted to copy whole sentences from their reading, or to write down every word from a lecture. This is not an efficient way of taking notes. Encourage your child to take notes as if he were writing a telegram. Charge points for every letter and word he uses as a way of teaching word economy. Another way to develop word economy skills is to create a set of notes that is too wordy and ask your child to make it more concise. Eventually, word economy will become automatic and make note taking easier.

Visual Marks and Highlighters

Encourage your child to use marks and highlighters to organize notes on the page. Here are some suggestions:

- Draw a horizontal line across the page to signal the end of one main idea and the start of another.
- Number the details that support the main idea.
- Highlight the key words, names, and dates.
- Insert questions marks next to notes that are unclear, or where you think information is missing. Then ask a classmate or the teacher for the missing information.

Taking Notes From Lectures

Even when students can take good notes from written material, applying this skill to lecture situations can be difficult. Students should start by just taking notes on the main ideas or the details rather than both at the same time. While at this level, students can ask the teacher or a fellow student for the missing information. As ability progresses, they can gradually take notes on more information.

You may also want to consider asking your child's teacher to provide partially completed notes. This classroom modification enables your child to take some notes himself while providing structured support. Over time, he will become a more independent note taker.

Note Taking vs. Note Making

There is a difference between taking notes while reading or listening, and using those notes to study. Getting the information down on paper is note taking; learning from those notes is note making. Here are some tips for helping your child develop good note making skills:

- Use only one side of the paper when taking notes. When you reach the end of the page, start on a new page instead of turning it over to write on the back. This leaves a blank page beside each page of notes when the notebook is open. The blank page provides space for questions for the teacher, a list of words to memorize, or study summaries.
- Revise and review notes within twenty-four hours of taking them. This increases your chances of keeping the information in long-term memory.
- Every week, preferably on Friday or over the weekend, you should remove all notes, homework, and other papers not needed for class the next week and clip them together (see The Master Notebook System earlier in this article). You should then review the material in the packet and make a list of the main ideas covered that week. These packets become good study guides when preparing for tests.

ORGANIZATION AND STUDY SKILLS SUMMARY

Ideally, children should begin to learn organization and study skills in the early elementary grades. However, it is never too late to help your child develop these skills. Even children who are taught good study skills in school will benefit from your reinforcement of them at home. Organizing notebooks, assignments, time and study space requires constant monitoring for some children before they can automatically and independently apply these skills.

While helping your child read and listen for main ideas, as well as take two-column notes, is challenging and time-consuming, it can help make a difference in your child's school performance. It's hard work, and you won't always have the answers. But through your sincere efforts, your child will know that you are committed to helping him learn!

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Additional information about publications, training, and resources can be found by visiting www.keystoliteracy.com.