Study Strategies

When to study:

1. **Study difficult or boring subjects first.**
   If your problem sets put you to sleep, get to them first, while you’re fresh. Save the subjects you enjoy for later.

2. **Avoid scheduling marathon study sessions.**
   When possible, study in shorter sessions, which tend to be more productive. If you do study in long sessions, take a planned break every hour. Work on different projects and avoid studying similar subjects back to back.

3. **Be aware of your best time of day.**
   Many students learn best in daylight hours, while others are most productive at night. Observe yourself and schedule study time for your most difficult subjects when you feel the most alert and productive.

4. **Use waiting time.**
   5 minutes waiting for the bus, 20 minutes waiting for the dentist, 10 minutes between classes -- waiting time adds up fast. Have short study tasks ready to do during these times. For example, carry 3X5 cards with equations, formulas, or definitions and pull them out anywhere. You can also use the time to review your class notes.

Where to study:

1. **Use a regular study area.**
   When you use the same place to study, day after day, your body becomes trained. The next time you’re in that environment, it will sense that it's time to study. You’ll be able to focus your concentration more quickly.

2. **Don't get too comfortable.**
   Put yourself into a situation where your mind is alert. Avoid studying on your bed, because this can lead to lower productivity while studying and insomnia while trying to sleep at night.

3. **Use the library.**
   Libraries are designed for learning. Entering a library is a signal to focus the mind and get to work.

4. **Set up study groups.**
   A study group doesn't take the place of individual study, but it forces you to articulate concepts and makes a review more fun and productive. Also, it helps you to avoid procrastination because of the "peer pressure".

5. **Avoid noise distractions.**
   Don't study in front of the TV. Turn off the stereo. Many students insist that they study better with music, and that may be true. However, the majority of research indicates that silence is the best form of music for study.

Questions to ask when you get stuck:

1. **What is one task I can accomplish toward my goal?**
   If you're intimidated by a big project, pick out one small task that you can complete in 5-10 minutes. The satisfaction of getting one thing done often jumpstarts your motivation. Meanwhile, the project gets smaller.

2. **Is this a piano?**
   Carpenters who build rough building frames have a saying when they bend a nail or hack a chunk out of a two-by-four: "Well, this ain't no piano." It means perfection is not necessary. If you can make a project 95% perfect in two hours, and 100% in four hours, ask yourself whether the additional 5% improvement is worth doubling the amount of time you spend. Accept lower standards where appropriate, especially when time is short. Of course, sometimes it is a “piano”. Learn what does and doesn’t need to be perfect, and prioritize your time accordingly.

3. **Ask your professor or GSI for tips.**
   If you’re having trouble in a particular class, your professor or GSI can be a great resource. Try going to office hours, asking a quick question after class, or sending an e-mail. In addition to clarifications about the course content, you can get suggestions on good strategies to use to learn the material and study for exams.

Adapted from: *Becoming a Master Student*, by David Ellis. (College Survival, Inc. 1984)