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## Helping Your Child with Organization and Study Skills

By: Joan Sedita (1999)

### Introduction

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Just as a carpenter needs the right tools (such as a saw and hammer) and basic skills (such as how to measure and cut wood) to frame a house, students need the right tools (such as notebooks and assignment pads) and basic study skills (such as reading and note-taking skills) to be successful in school.

We all know students who finish college with no formal study skills training. These students have problem-solving abilities which enable them to develop independently organization and study strategies. They can create their own 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.

Other students, however --- particularly those with learning disabilities --- need direct, systematic instruction to develop these skills. Learning disabilities related to reading, spelling, and writing skills; concrete or abstract organization skills; short- or long-term memory; or attention controls affect certain 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 with students with learning disabilities over the past twenty-five years, I have developed a flexible study skills model that can be taught in tutorials and small groups, as well as incorporated into regular class curricula. Parts of the model can also be used by you, as a parent, to help your child become an independent learner.

### A study skills model

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The first part of the model addresses organization strategies for notebooks, materials, and assignments; study space; and time. The second part addresses three "foundation" study skills: reading and listening for main ideas, applying two-column note-taking skills, and summarizing. The final part of the model combines the foundation skills for building textbook, testing, and research and report writing skills.

The portions of the model which are most useful for parents as they work with their children are

- Organization strategies
- Reading and listening for main ideas
- Note-taking skills

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

## **Organization strategies**

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### **The Master Notebook System**

The Master Notebook System helps students keep paperwork and materials organized and in one place, locate important papers, and refrain from carrying around unnecessary clutter. It also helps students prepare for tests because they compile and summarize work weekly. The system has three parts:

- Working notebook
- Reserve accordion file
- Reference notebook

Teachers or parents can help students not only set up the system but also transfer material from the working notebook to the reserve accordion file on a regular basis.

### **Working notebook**

The working notebook is the daily notebook your child takes to class. It holds all the papers and information needed each day. Any three-ring binder can serve as a working notebook; the nylon zippered type tends to last longer. 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
- A ruler
- Four section dividers for each subject labeled homework, notes, handouts, and quizzes/tests
- An assignment book

These items are available at most office supply stores in a three-hole punched format so they can be easily inserted 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.

One working notebook for all of your child's classes might be too large for some students, especially if they are in high school. Two medium-size notebooks with two or three subjects in each is an alternative to one large notebook. Morning classes might be placed in one, and afternoon classes might be placed in another. For younger children (i.e., grades 4 and 5), an alternative to one notebook might be several half-inch notebooks which are color coordinated, one for each subject (e.g., blue for math, red for science, etc.).

Whichever alternative noted above that you choose, the important thing is that on a daily basis, your child should date, three-hole punch, and file any of his school papers under the appropriate divider for each subject. Your child should also note assignments in detail in his assignment book.

## Reserve accordion file

The reserve accordion file is for filing completed work and material no longer needed for class. The file stays at home or in your child's locker. It provides a single place to organize and store finished work. It also keeps 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. 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. The next step is to attach the list and summary to the clipped-together work and to store the packet in a pocket of the accordion file. It is best to have one accordion file (with four to six sections) for each subject. After several weeks, your child's accordion file will contain a series of packets that can be used to review and study for a unit or semester test.

The goal with this system is to eventually have you 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 teacher(s) for their input about which papers can be culled out of the working notebook, and which should remain for the next week.

## Reference notebook

The reference notebook is a smaller three-ring binder or a section at the back of the working notebook. The reference notebook is an individualized collection of resources; it reflects your child's specific needs. It should contain handouts and lists of information your child needs to reference quickly in class. Some items to include follow:

- 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 and essay question, how to organize your notebook) and templates (such as formats for science experiments)
- Place items for the reference notebook in plastic sheet protectors with three-ring holes so they will last longer (these are available in most stationary or office supply stores).

## Organizing homework, study space and time

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### Organizing homework

A good assignment book is essential for completing homework successfully. While some students buy three- by five-inch spiral pads for recording assignments, the pages are too small, the lines are too thin, and there are not visual dividers to separate assignments. A

good assignment book is eight and a half by eleven inches, with three holes for inserting it into the working notebook, neatly divided sections, and plenty of room on each page.

To help your child organize homework, you can create a homework checklist with the following items for each subject:

- \_\_\_\_\_I have the materials I need to do the assignment (book, notes, handouts).
- \_\_\_\_\_I completed the assignment.
- \_\_\_\_\_I checked the assignment to be sure it was correct.
- \_\_\_\_\_There was no homework in this subject tonight.

By making multiple copies of the checklist, your child can use one for each subject each night – independently or with your help.

## **Study space**

Routines about when and where homework is completed are essential. While students will not usually admit to it, they all benefit from structure for completing homework. This is especially relevant for students with learning disabilities. 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 well-structured 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 it and make it a routine.

## **Organizing time**

Starting in the third or fourth grade, your child should be trained 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 write in and check events, such as sports practices, family outings, and school dates.

Also encourage your child to use the monthly calendar in his working notebook. The child should transfer his personal events from the family calendar to the notebook calendar. He should also note upcoming tests, long-term assignment due dates (such as a book report due a week later), appointments with the school guidance counselor, and vacation days. Unless your child regularly refers to the calendar, its value will diminish.

Daily planners 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 also be scheduled.

It's important not to make assumptions about how well your child can tell time without a digital clock, can understand and follow class schedules, or can sense how time flows daily, weekly, and monthly. Students with learning disabilities often have difficulty with the simplest aspects of time and planning, and these deficits 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**

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Too often, teachers say that parents are not involved enough with their children's school work and parents say that teachers do not provide enough information for them to help their children. To avoid this situation, establish communication with your child's teachers as soon as possible – preferably before the first day of school – and maintain it 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's to be completed. Be willing to check, sign, and return a homework sheet each night to maintain communications between you and the teacher. Ask the teacher to note how long each assignment should take to complete, then note back to the teacher how long it actually took. This is essential information for the teacher to make appropriate modifications to homework assignments.

## **Reading and listening for main ideas**

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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 like, "I listened to the teacher, but I didn't remember it for the test" and "I read the chapter twice, but I couldn't answer the questions in class the next day."

The need is to teach students with learning disabilities to:

- Listen and read for meaning
- Distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information
- Organize details for easy sorting, prioritizing, and studying

This need is met by teaching students how to recognize main ideas and put them in their own words.

Most of us use main idea skills everyday. For example, we easily find items in the supermarket because products are arranged in main idea categories, such as dairy, bakery, and produce. Similarly, we 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.

Individuals with learning disabilities often have difficulty "chunking" or sorting information into

units or main ideas. Instead, they become overwhelmed by the myriad of details.

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.

The basic skill of identifying main ideas is the foundation skill for more advanced study skills, such as summarizing, note-taking, and textbook skills. It is therefore the most important skill for students to acquire.

## **Categorizing**

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In identifying main ideas, the most basic 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 enables a student 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, then 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 of following these steps.

Finding the main idea for a list of words that are abstract (e.g., lonesome, discouraged, grim, brooding, and sorrowful: main idea is "sad feelings" or "negative emotions") is more difficult than a list of concrete objects (such as the fruit).

## **Main ideas in paragraphs: The topic sentence**

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

Though the topic sentence is often the first sentence in a paragraph, this is not always the case. The topic sentence can sometimes 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 reading, ask your child to underline or highlight the main idea if it is stated in a topic sentence. If the main idea has to be inferred, ask your child to write it in his own words in the margin or on a piece of paper. This skill 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; students need to infer the main ideas. If your child has difficulty determining the main ideas, ask the teacher to supply a list of main ideas at least a day 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

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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 students 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.

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 a succinct 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

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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. When looking for the topic, your child should look for the words that are most often repeated. They help suggest the topic.
3. 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).
4. Your child can double-check the main idea by asking if what they have underlined or written is too general or specific.

## Note-taking skills

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Note-taking is a way for students to record information from a lecture or reading assignment. It should enable 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 into their own words. However, note-taking (especially from lectures) is a very difficult task for many students with learning disabilities. That's because it requires the integration of listening, comprehension, sequencing, eye-hand coordination, writing, and spelling skills. Many of these skills – individually or in combination – are the primary effects of having a learning disability. That's why students feel overwhelmed when they must take notes and, in some cases, why they develop a fear of note-taking.

It is important for you to stress the value of consistently taking and using notes with your child. 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 memories 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, for they can go back over the information several times without the time pressure that occurs when taking lecture notes.

### 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 learn to take notes using the two-column method described below.

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 in linear note-taking (such as outlining) exists as a stream of facts, with no visual way to distinguish main ideas from details.

A 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 them.

Some hints for effective note-taking follow:

- Use as few words as possible – do not write out 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 the two-column note-taking method by taking notes 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 developing the sub-skills below.

## **Abbreviation skills**

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While educators assume that most junior high and high school students know how to use common abbreviations (e.g., Mr. for Mister and w/ for with), many students – especially with learning disabilities – do not.

Practicing abbreviation skills can be fun, and it doesn't require much time. All you need to do is ask your child how to abbreviate certain words when you are writing or talking together. Frequent practice is important.

## **Word economy**

Many students are tempted to copy whole sentences from their readings or try to write down every word from a lecture. These practices make it impossible for students to keep up.

Instead, encourage your child to take notes as if he was writing a telegram. Charge points for every letter and word they use as a way of teaching word economy. You can also write notes that are too wordy and ask your child to make them more concise. Eventually, word economy will become automatic for your child and make note-taking easier.

## **Visual markers**

Encourage your child to use markers 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, dates, and the like.
- Insert question marks next to notes that are unclear and require more information from a classmate or teacher.

## **Taking notes from lectures**

Even when students have good note-taking skills for written material, the jump to lecture situations can be difficult. The priority is to prevent students from trying to write down everything, growing overwhelmed, and giving up. To avoid this, 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 the skill becomes automatic, students can take notes on more information.

You can also ask your child's teacher to provide partially completed two-column notes (e.g., with the main ideas filled in on the left side). This classroom modification enables your child to take some notes himself while providing structured support. Over time, he can 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 note-making skills:

- Use only one side of the page when taking notes. When your child reaches the end of the page, he should start a fresh page instead of turning it over to write on the back. This leaves a whole blank page beside each page of notes. The blank offers 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 child's chances of holding the information in long-term memory.
- Every week, preferably on Friday or over the weekend, your child 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). Your child should then review the material in the packet and make a list of the main ideas covered that week. These packets become good study skills when preparing for tests.

## **Organization and study skills summary**

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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 success in school. You won't always have all the answers. It's your committed, consistent effort that counts.

## **About the author**

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Joan Sedita has a private consulting and teacher training practice in Boxford, Massachusetts. Joan is an experienced educator and teacher trainer who has conducted numerous workshops, training seminars, professional development programs, and consultations for educators and parents throughout the United States.

Joan has authored a number of books and articles, including the best-selling Landmark Study Skills Guide, Learning Disabilities: Information and Resources, and The Kurzweil Study Skills Guide, and Teaching the Language Arts Tutorial.

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