CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE STAGE

What’s on your mind?

SPOTLIGHT ON CLASSROOM SKILLS

When I got to college, I thought I was prepared. After all, I had finished high school without much difficulty and with fairly good grades. So you can imagine that I was a bit “put off” when my adviser told me I had to enroll in a study skills course. “Why do I need that?” was my first thought. “That’s a course for students with problems—not me!”

Well, I quickly discovered that I did not know what I did not know! That is, I was unaware that college success would require a new kind of approach to study skills—effective and efficient strategies to learn.

Study skills are necessary for serious students who want to master their academic work. Find a book, find a course, or find a person who can help you evaluate your current level of skills and build a series of success strategies that apply to all of your courses. Improved study skills not only will help you master your course work, but they also will make you feel better about yourself as a student.

Study skills are for all students. They help students develop strategies and techniques to focus their energies on efficient and effective studying. And sound study skills contribute to positive self-esteem. A student who can achieve in the classroom will feel better about his or her capabilities. In other words, competence will foster esteem.

PREVIEW

By the time you finish reading this chapter and completing its activities you will be able to:

- Identify at least two study skill challenges that you have.
- Identify at least two study skill strengths that you have.
- Explain how you might be able to use your study skill strengths to work on one of your study skill challenges.
- List at least five study skill topics covered in this book that you can immediately use.
- Explain how a study skills course can help you experience more success as a student.

KEY TERMS

- Academic challenge
- Academic strength
- Critical thinking
- Locus of control
- Study skills
CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF WHEN YOU HEAR THE TERM STUDY SKILLS?

Most students approach a study skills course (or book) with little or no enthusiasm. It’s not one of the most popular topics in the course catalog. Typical responses include:

- I am too smart for this course!
- Why do I need this course? I do my homework every night. Isn’t that studying?
- What makes smart students smart? They must do nothing but homework—bunch of nerds!
- My adviser made me take this course.
- Sounds like an easy A!

If you break the term study skills into its two parts you have:

- **Study**: This is your personal effort to learn something. It could be academic (learn how to speak a foreign language), athletic (learn how to play tennis), occupational (learn how to do a particular job), or emotional (learn how to control anxiety or a temper). You have “studied” your entire life—even before you ever set foot in a school. That is, you have learned how to do certain things. For our purposes, this book will concentrate on learning within the school setting.
  - **Synonyms** include deep thinking, inspection, analysis, and concentration.

- **Skill**: When someone has a skill he or she can do something with a degree of expertise. A skill is sharpened through practice and experience. Even someone with a natural talent—say in music—will need practice to become expert or “skilled” in his or her area. When you have a skill you are able to do something well. Typically when someone develops a skill it involves a certain amount of studying.
  - **Synonyms** include ability, mastery, competence, and expertise.

For our purposes, study skills will refer to your abilities to learn how to do academic things well. A look at the table of contents of this book reveals some of the usual study skill topics of organization, note taking, reading, problem solving, active learning, and test taking.

So, whether your school required you to take a study skills course or you decided it would be good for you, recognize that such a course is not designed for “problem students,” “slow learners,” or “struggling students.” It remains a course for the committed student who wishes to discover the best ways to learn and excel on campus.

I REALLY DO WANT TO LEARN—BUT I JUST CAN’T!

It is frustrating to have the desire to learn but come up short on result. As you work through the activities in this book, identify obstacles to your learning as well as the strengths that help you learn. What stands in your way
of being as successful as you would like? Are these obstacles related to attitude or ability? What strengths have helped you in the past to achieve in the classroom?

Activity 1.1, “Assessment of Strengths and Challenges,” will help you focus on some of your academic challenges—as well as your strengths. All students bring skills and strategies from academic experiences that will help them be successful in the college classroom.

Before you can work on your challenges, you need to know what they are. That may seem obvious, but sometimes we miss the obvious. So, take a moment and complete the following checklist. At the same time, it will help to remind yourself of your strengths—those things you do well. You may be able to use a strength to minimize or eliminate a challenge. For instance, your ability to critically think may help you determine the best way to address a test-taking challenge.

The challenges you want to concern yourself with at this point are process challenges, not content challenges. For this activity focus on what you do, rather than the material you learn. Concentrate, for instance, on the ways in which you can become a more capable student in math (or English, or history, or science, or Spanish, or some other class).

Below, check your strengths when it comes to studying. What do you do well? Check as many or as few as apply. Take your time and think about each choice carefully.

- Setting goals
- Completing goals
- Writing a strong essay thesis statement
- Supporting an opinion with facts

(continued)
CHAPTER 1

- Establishing priorities
- Completing work on time
- Eliminating distractions
- Taking notes from class lectures
- Taking notes from the textbook
- Taking organized notes
- Getting to class on time
- Participating in class
- Keeping an organized notebook
- Regularly reviewing and organizing class notes
- Coming to class prepared
- Understanding and using learning style information
- Using critical thinking skills to solve problems
- Getting the main point from a reading assignment
- Organizing an essay
- Writing and completing an essay
- Establishing relationships and connections
- Remembering important information for exams
- Controlling test anxiety
- Preparing, in plenty of time, for exams
- Completing exams in the time allotted
- Learning from previous exam mistakes
- Taking study breaks
- Studying alone
- Studying with friends
- Locating information for research projects
- Evaluating information for research projects
- Other: ________________________________

Now, check your challenges when it comes to studying. What do you need to improve? Check as many or as few as apply. Take your time and think about each choice carefully.

- Setting goals
- Completing goals
- Establishing priorities
- Completing work on time
- Eliminating distractions
- Taking notes from class lectures
- Taking notes from the textbook
- Taking organized notes
- Getting to class on time
- Participating in class
- Keeping an organized notebook
- Regularly reviewing and organizing class notes
- Coming to class prepared
- Understanding and using learning style information
- Using critical thinking skills to solve problems
- Getting the main point from a reading assignment
- Writing a strong essay thesis statement
- Supporting an opinion with facts
- Organizing an essay
- Writing and completing an essay
- Establishing relationships and connections
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- Preparing, in plenty of time, for exams
- Completing exams in the time allotted
- Learning from previous exam mistakes
- Taking study breaks
- Studying alone
- Studying with friends
- Locating information for research projects
- Evaluating information for research projects
- Other: ________________________________
Review your checked boxes in each section above. List below the five strengths you consider your biggest assets, ranking them from 1 to 5. Do the same for your challenges.

**STRENGTHS**

1. __________________________________________
2. __________________________________________
3. __________________________________________
4. __________________________________________
5. __________________________________________

**CHALLENGES**

1. __________________________________________
2. __________________________________________
3. __________________________________________
4. __________________________________________
5. __________________________________________

Look at the strengths you listed. In what ways might you be able to use those strengths to help you minimize your challenges? For instance, if one of your weaknesses is “getting the main idea from a reading assignment” and a strength is, “taking organized notes,” how can you use that strength to help with your challenges? List the strength you want to discuss here: ____________

How can your strength be used to minimize one of your challenges? _______

Based on your rankings above, what can you say about your study skills? Are they strong? How can they be improved? _______________________________

WHAT IS ON YOUR MIND?

Each new term in college presents its own set of challenges. New courses, new instructors, and new demands require students to reevaluate their study and relationship skills in and out of the classroom.

Books such as this present ideas and topics in a rather linear fashion. Each chapter devotes space and activities to a particular topic. After you finish one topic you move to the next—and so on until you finish the book.

The realities of your life, however, do not follow a straight path. You have many things tugging at you on a daily basis. And what may be of importance to the student sitting next to you in class, may not even be on your radar.

For instance, one of the first chapters of this book looks at goal setting. While being able to identify a specific direction is important, you might very
well be more concerned right now about how to complete—on time—all of the assignments you have.

The purpose of this chapter is to give you a chance to explore what is on your mind about study skills.

**A Quick Preview of Coming Attractions**

Movie “trailers”—quick advertisements—give previews of coming attractions. With a couple of clips from a movie, viewers have an idea of what the movie has to offer. Effective trailers will draw people to the movie.

Consider, if you would, this book to be the “movie” and the following chapters of this book to be the “scenes.” Together they all make up the main feature. This chapter will help you preview the coming attractions—the coming chapters. This will warm you up and prepare you for what is to come. It will also help you locate information that is of immediate interest.

The following twelve activities (1.2 through 1.13) allow you to look at what this book offers and to locate the topics that may be most helpful at this point in your college term.

At first glance you may believe twelve activities (one for each chapter) to be overwhelming. But there is a simple guideline that will help you maximize your time. **Spend no more than five minutes on each activity.** If you desire, you can devote more time but remember that you will have plenty of time to spend on each chapter later in the term. For now, you only have two purposes:

- Concentrate on what is on your mind about effective study skills right now.
- Familiarize yourself with the contents of this textbook.

By time you are done with the activities you will have identified twelve topics of immediate interest to you—and you will have done this in only sixty minutes. What a valuable investment in a short period of time. Wouldn’t you say you and your academic success are worth an hour?*

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**ACTIVITY 1.2 CRITICAL THINKING**

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 2. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.

- List the item here.

- Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

**ACTIVITY 1.3 GOAL SETTING AND MOTIVATION**

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 3. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.

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*And you will have practiced a reading strategy known as SQ4R, which will be fully described in Chapter 8.
Setting the Stage

- List the item here.
- Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

**ORGANIZING TIME AND SPACE**

ACTIVITY 1.4

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 4. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.
- List the item here.
- Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

**LEARNING STYLES**

ACTIVITY 1.5

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 5. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.
- List the item here.
- Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

**CLASS TIME**

ACTIVITY 1.6

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 6. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.
- List the item here.
- Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

**NOTE TAKING**

ACTIVITY 1.7

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 7. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.
- List the item here.
- Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?
ACTIVITY 1.8  READING

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 8. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.

○ List the item here.

○ Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

ACTIVITY 1.9  MEMORY

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 9. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.

○ List the item here.

○ Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

ACTIVITY 1.10  TEST TAKING

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 10. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.

○ List the item here.

○ Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?

ACTIVITY 1.11  INFORMATION LITERACY

Look at the bold-faced headings, tables, and figures of Chapter 11. Choose one item (heading, table, or figure) you can use right now.

○ List the item here.

○ Briefly, explain your interest in this item. Does it address a strength of yours or a challenge?
IS THERE A COMMON THREAD TO THESE CHAPTERS?

You will find three core study skill principles present throughout this book.

- **Critical thinking.** This requires gathering information, weighing it for accuracy and appropriateness, and then making a rational decision based on the facts that have been gathered. Critical thinkers are active learners who do not stop asking questions about whatever is before them. Each chapter of this book has a common emphasis on problem solving.

- **Organization.** All of the strategies require some level of organization. The successful students have it; those without it struggle. You will learn how to use both your time and space effectively and efficiently to help you enjoy and prosper from your college experience.

- **Practice.** The strategies found in the following chapters are virtually useless unless you take the time to study them, practice them, and apply them. When you find a reflective self-assessment activity in a chapter, set aside some quiet time for yourself and complete it carefully. After all, the time you invest is time you are investing in yourself. What a wonderful investment!

**Locus of Control**

As you saw in Activity 1.3, Chapter 3 will examine the issue of goal setting and motivation—why you do what you do. You will also read about locus of control\(^1\) in that chapter. Generally speaking, this concept describes how people explain what happens to them. Do they accept responsibility for life and make things happen, or do they look for reasons (excuses) why things happen to them?

A student with an *internal* locus of control may explain poor test grades by looking into the mirror, pointing at himself, and saying, “I should have studied more.” The student accepts the responsibility for what happens to him. On the other hand, a student who is more apt to blame the teacher exhibits an *external* locus of control. A comment such as “That teacher is not fair” reflects a student looking to assign responsibility elsewhere.

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Refer to Figure 1.1. As with any continuum, few people are found on either extreme. Most of us fall somewhere in between. But upon reflection we will notice that we tend to lean to one end or the other. As you progress through the semester, think of this continuum. Are you a person who generally takes responsibility for your actions (leaning toward the “internal” end)? Or are you someone who is more apt to blame someone else (leaning toward the “external” end)? Use this information to heighten your awareness.

**What Will Not Happen By Using This Book?**

This book does not offer a way to “beat the system” in order to earn the highest possible grades. No gimmicks, no tricks. To offer such would be like going on a trendy diet to lose weight but never changing the behaviors that resulted in the extra baggage. If it were as simple as just reading a book or watching a video, you, your classmates, and most other students would be happy with high GPAs. Unfortunately, it’s not that easy. So if you want a quick-fix approach offering instant gratification, the following chapters will not be for you.

**What Will Happen By Using This Material?**

The material in this book will help you identify and change those behaviors that are keeping you from being the very best student you can be. It will also help you strengthen and maintain the habits that have worked for you in the past. The following chapters concentrate on practical skills to build academic success as well as a positive self-image. These skills help you make the transition from being a student who simply gets by to being a successful student who is aware, insightful, and confident.

Specifically, if you diligently follow the suggestions in these chapters you will:

- Learn the strategies, use the strategies immediately, and continually practice the strategies.
- Identify your unique learning style and make it work for you.
- Understand that the motivation to do well is within you. External influences may cause a temporary burst of inspiration. However, for the long term,
you must have confidence in your abilities, address your shortcomings, and develop skills that will guide you through school—and through life.

- Find that study skill strategies are also excellent life-management tools. These techniques are easily transferable to everyday life and the workplace.

Interestingly enough, academic success does not have to be accompanied by tedious hours of work. Yes, there will be work but what you want are productive hours of work. Have you ever studied for a long time only to be baffled by a large red F on an exam? How frustrating. Many students complain, “I sat at that desk for hours last night—and I still bombed!” In situations like this the problem may be your strategy, not the number of hours you have studied. Consider the following:

Given a list of tasks to remember, people will tend to remember best the first thing or group of things and the last thing or group of things on that list. The student who decides to study three hours without a break for an exam more than likely will remember what he or she studied at the very beginning of the study time and at the very end. Retention of the material in the middle will be more questionable. One author has found that “a decline in recall occurs, especially for material studied during the mid-point of the process, if study periods are too lengthy.”

An important strategy is to give yourself a break when studying. Be reasonable and moderate in your approach. A related strategy is to give yourself an appropriate reward at each brief break. For instance, after one hour of reviewing your reading assignment, you can get a snack, or listen to five minutes of music, or just walk outside for a stretch break. The point is to stay fresh and alert. More time is not necessarily better time. Examine the following two options.

- **Option 1.** You start studying at 7:00 p.m. and stop at 10:00 p.m. During this time you take no breaks, so you wind up studying for three straight hours. Therefore, there is one beginning point (7:00 p.m.) and one ending point (10:00 p.m.). That means there are two groups of information that you will likely remember. And if there is a lot of “information in the middle,” you may find that information more difficult to remember.

- **Option 2.** You start studying at 7:00 p.m. and stop at 10:00 p.m. This time you study for one hour and then take a five-minute break. This is followed by another hour of studying, followed by a brief

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break, before resuming your final period of studying. In this example there are three beginnings and three endings during the study period. That means there are six groups of (potentially) remembered information.

Which option above do you think will be more effective? This simple example points out that study strategies do not have to be painful, nor do they have to consume all of your time.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Before leaving this chapter, keep the following points in mind:

- **Know your purpose** and mission as a student. Make the commitment to focus on success and be a successful student. Chapters 2, 3, 6, and 13 will help you.

- **Organize your time and space.** Successful students take charge of their time. You cannot control others, but you can control your own actions. You will find Chapters 4, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 of help.

- **Be positive.** Don’t hinder yourself with defeatist attitudes. Visualize success and move toward it. Be realistic but also challenge yourself. Chapters 3 and 13 concentrate on helpful strategies.

- **Review, reorganize, and relate.** You will be exposed to a great deal of material in college. Get in the habit of finding connections among your assigned readings, class notes, and discussions. Once you learn how to do this, you will have a better command of the material before you. Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 12 will be of particular help to you.

- **Be an active learner.** Know where your instructors are going with a lesson. Don’t just sit there. Follow them—maybe even get there ahead of them. Chapters 6, 7, and 10 will provide helpful strategies.

- **Pick and mix and match the strategies** of this book to suit your personality and learning style. Adapt these strategies to your learning style, practice them faithfully, and apply them to your studies. You will see improvement. Studying is a process. It is not a “get rich” scheme to gain good grades with little effort. Chapters 2 and 5 will be of particular help for you.
At the beginning of this chapter, five measurable objectives were presented. They have been reprinted below for your convenience. Based on the strategies you have learned in this chapter, fill in the lines beneath each item (or use a separate sheet of paper).

○ Identify at least two study skill challenges that you have.
  ○ List your two challenges here:_____________________________________

○ Identify at least two study skill strengths that you have.
  ○ List your two strengths here:_____________________________________

○ Explain how you might be able to use your study skill strengths to work on one of your study skill challenges.
  ○ Write your explanation here. ______________________________________

○ List at least five study skill topics covered in this book that you can immediately use.
  ○ You may wish to refer to Activities 1.2 through 1.12 before writing your answer. __________

○ Explain how a study skills course can help you experience more success as a student.
  ○ Write your answer here. ______________________________________

At the end of every chapter in this book, you will be asked to do a “reality check.” We all know that it is one thing to read about a topic and quite another to put newfound knowledge into practice. The “reality check” section in each chapter will allow you to do this.

This chapter’s reality check will be a bit different from the following chapters. For this one you are asked to lay a foundation for all future work in this book—and in your college studies. You will be asked to make a commitment to yourself.

Because this academic journey is about you—your desire, your needs, and your success—take a moment and complete the covenant in Figure 1.2.

Consider two things about this document:

- This is a covenant, not a contract. The term contract too often has connotations of distrust: “I’m not sure you will do what you say; therefore, I want you to sign this contract.” For our purposes, let’s use a much more positive approach. A covenant implies respect and trust. It is a public proclamation of that respect.

- This covenant is strictly personal. It is an agreement you will make with yourself. If you don’t follow through, you don’t follow through with yourself. Your signature indicates your desire to improve, your respect for yourself and those around you, and the trust you place in your abilities to do the best you can.

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**figure 1.2**

A covenant with myself

- I realize that what I do has an impact on what I want.
- I further recognize that what I do affects those around me.
- Therefore, I pledge to make choices that reflect respect, responsibility, and honesty.

_________ ____________

Today’s date My signature

(Keep this covenant in a place where you will see it each day.)