STARS: S T A R S

GRADE IMPROVEMENT

Okay, so your grades were not that good last semester. Check out the list below and see if there is something to add to your "things that I'm going to change" list.

IMPROVE YOUR STUDY SKILLS:

Go to class!

If you skip class you will never know what you missed. Getting notes from someone else leaves you with only their impressions of what was said. The point of taking notes is to get your own meaning of what is being said and to hear the instructors verbally highlight what they think is important. If you attend every class and work very hard to understand the material, your professor will be more inclined to help you later if you have a problem. Whitman is a small college and your professor does notice when you are not there, even if he or she doesn't take attendance.

Plan ahead for assignment deadlines and heavy work loads.

Read the syllabus for every class and put the important due dates on your calendar or long-term planner. Most courses don't have "surprise tests" and "surprise papers". By the first week of classes you should know that you have X number of tests and X number of papers due at mid-semester time. It should not come as a shock if you have two finals the same day. Take a look at the reading load for each class. If you can't handle it, then maybe you should consider changing your schedule.

Do the assigned reading.

If you don't have time to read it all before class, do step one of the SQ3R method (see the STARS sheet on Reading). Your professor expects you to have completed the background reading so that the lecture will make sense. Many students are puzzled by tests that include "things the professor never went over in class". Those test questions were probably in the assigned reading. When a class has a graded discussion component to it, most of the topics will come from the readings. (P.S. Yes, there is such thing as a stupid question. They are questions that reveal to your instructor in an obvious way that you didn't even skim the assigned reading.)

Create a big picture.

Try not to get bogged down with details that may overwhelm you. Learn to take notes on what you hear and what you read, then turn the notes into a chart, key word diagram, map, or picture. Nonsense things are harder to remember than those that have a context and make sense to you.

Have short but frequent study sessions.

Avoid marathon study sessions. Studies show that the most effective studying occurs during the first hour, so why not make every study hour the "first hour"? Create tasks that can be completed in about an hour, and then take a break. Reward yourself for staying on track and completing your study tasks, but remember that what really increases motivation is the satisfaction that you have accomplished something during your study hour.

Create an effective study space.

We are creatures of habit. We also associate the "place" with the "activity" that goes on there. So with that in mind, create your own space that is just for studying. Avoid reading in bed or trying to study on a backpacking trip. You'll find that you will reduce your start up time and be more effective if you have everything you need in one place. Make sure that your study space is free of visual and audio distractions. You may think that you study better with music, but try this experiment and see if it's true. Pick out a long poem that you do not know and time yourself to see how long it takes you to memorize the first four stanzas with music versus how long it takes you to memorize the next 4 stanzas without music. The results may surprise you.

Study the most difficult subjects first.

If you wait and study the difficult material when you are tired, you may find that you become frustrated more easily. In general, you should do tasks that require analytical and problem solving skills when you are refreshed and optimistic.

Study during the day as much as you can.

Even if you consider yourself a "night owl," you are probably more productive during the day. Try to gradually wean yourself from the late night paper writing and studying routine by setting goals to use the hour between classes and the odd 15 minutes of spare time to tackle your homework. Schedule sleeping for the night!

IMPROVE YOURSELF:

Create a healthy lifestyle.

Avoid partying during the week. Be aware of the effects of certain foods and drugs on your life. Alcohol can be a good social drug but it will not help you learn; marijuana can reduce your motivation; stimulants like caffeine can help you stay awake but can effect concentration. The way the drugs (legal or illegal) work varies, but the bottom line is that they all imitate or interfere with neurotransmitters in the brain and affect your ability to learn.

Take responsibility for your mistakes.

It's hard to change behaviors if you deny that you are responsible for them. As soon as you figure out how you failed, then you can figure out how to succeed. If the fault is with the roommate, the computer, the alarm clock, the professor, or just plain bad luck, then you are truly in a helpless situation and will find it hard to change. Also, don't blame yourself—it's the same as blaming others and doesn't result in much more than self-pity. Taking responsibility and recognizing that you created your situation will give you the empowerment to change it!

Create a positive attitude.

It's tempting to say to yourself, "Okay, I really screwed up last semester so I'm going to have to chain myself to my desk every night until I finish all my work." It works better to create a study schedule that lets you feel good about yourself as a student by following some of the suggestions above. Don't ground yourself from all the fun things that you like to do; you should be able to plan your week to include social activities.

Set reasonable goals.

Students that are high achievers tend to set goals that they can achieve or exceed. Students that are under achievers tend to overestimate what they can accomplish and end up feeling inadequate even if they did a lot. If your goals are too ambitious, you run the risk of burning out after the first week or becoming overly discouraged.

Get help.

After taking responsibility for your mistakes, don't forget to take advantage of all the resources available to help you create a solution. Consider making an appointment to see your adviser or the Academic Resource Center.

Recognize where change is needed.

Don't fall into the same traps as you did before. Some things that you did worked, other things didn't—it is difficult sometimes to figure out which is which. The fear of change can be the biggest obstacle to success.