Andrea’s Top Ten Study Tips

1. **Study on as many days as possible for a test.**

   As soon as one exam in a class is over, start studying for the next one. Don’t wait for the study guide to be given to you. Decide how much total time you can afford to give to preparing for that exam, and divide it evenly among all the days that you have until the test. A large body of research shows that if the same amount of time is divided among a large number of days rather than a small number, the test grade will be higher. This tendency is called the spacing effect. For example, if you can spend 20 hours studying for a certain test and you have 20 days between tests, it’s much better to study one hour on each of the 20 days than two hours on 10 days or four hours on five days. Your brain is helping you remember the information even when you are sleeping and not thinking about it.

2. **Be sure you understand the instructions before you start an assignment.**

   Ask the instructor any questions you have about how to do the assignment, and write down his or her answers to your questions. Do not ask classmates, relatives or friends. They are not guaranteed to know what the instructor wants. Even a tutor should be a last resort, since tutors may not be able to tell from the instructions exactly how to answer your questions.

3. **Manage your time for doing assignments.**

   When you get the syllabus for each class, put the due dates on a wall calendar that shows a whole month at once. Also put the dates you have chosen to have parts or stages of each assignment done.

4. **Memorize by testing yourself—do not rely on repeated reading of the course material to get it memorized for tests.**

   There are two things wrong with just reading. First, we have short-term and long-term memory. Short-term is 20 seconds or less. Long-term is anything over 20 seconds. Short-term memory holds only a very small amount of material. When you read, your short-term memory is constantly “kicking out” what you just read to make room for the new material coming in. Second, reading involves recognizing, not recalling. The information is in front of you. Taking a test involves recalling. You have to remember information that is not being given to you. It is far better to do well on a test if when you take it this is not the first time you have had to recall this information. You will do better if you have practiced recalling it, not just repeated recognizing it. If you were an actor cast in a play, you would start rehearsals using the script and slowly use it less and less until you could say your lines without it, recalling them. You would not rely on reading your lines out loud from the script through all the rehearsals, knowing you would have to give up the script for the performance.
To get information into your long-term memory and become able to recall it, test yourself on it over and over. You can do this with flash cards or by having someone ask you questions. Practice tests can also be helpful but usually do not contain enough material by themselves.

5. **Reread your class notes from each class meeting later that same day.**

Doing this helps you remember the material by giving you a chance to go over it soon, yet while you are not in the middle of worrying about actually making the notes.

6. **Look up words you don’t know when reading textbooks.**

In order to understand a book properly, you need to understand all the words. Many books will have a glossary at the back or have specialized words in bold type defined in the margins. It’s a good idea to keep a bookmark in the glossary.

7. **Keep a good dictionary near you when you read.**

This means a good one that has enough words and enough definitions of those words. Little pocket dictionaries don’t always work well enough. Online dictionaries are big enough. Hard-copy dictionaries measuring 9 by 12 by 2 inches are also big enough. Some high-quality dictionaries are Encarta, American Heritage, Random House, Oxford English and Merriam-Webster. I personally prefer this last one to dictionaries written by Webster alone.

8. **Highlight in your textbooks.**

Read a paragraph, paying attention to what seems most important. Then, right away, read the same paragraph again, this time highlighting the main points. This way you know from the first reading what the most important things are, something you cannot know for sure until you have finished reading the paragraph once.

9. **If you are renting your books or want to sell them back, you can still mark passages as being important by marking on post-its.**

Put a row of post-its in the margin of each paragraph you want to “highlight” and, instead of highlighting in the paragraphs, make a bracket around the lines you want to mark. You can do this on the post-its so that you will not be marking on the book’s pages. When it is time to give the book back or sell it, you just take the post-its off.

10. **When taking a test, go through it at least three times, doing harder questions each time.**

Do the easiest questions first to make sure you get to all of these. Then do the somewhat harder questions. Finally, do the hardest ones. This way, you are also giving yourself time at the end for the few questions that may take a lot more time to think through.