



CHAPTER 2

Developing Study Skills

STUDY TIP

Work hard at staying organized. Keep all of your class notes, binders, papers, and flash cards dated and neatly organized. Taking 5 to 10 minutes every other day to make sure this is done can really help your study habits in the long run. If you use a smartphone, tablet, or other electronic device, be sure you have a way of keeping it charged and connected to the Internet if needed.



STUDY TIP

Be sure to account for time you will need to prepare for clinical assignments. Also allow time for travel to and from clinical sites and time to complete clinical assignments such as case studies or care plans. Preparation can be time consuming and may take away from study time if it is not properly built into your schedule.

What Are Good Study Skills?

Having good study skills means you have developed conscious and skillful study habits, devised a consistent study schedule that incorporates methods for learning and understanding nursing content, and established a routine that promotes use of clinical judgment and synthesis of client information. Good study habits develop through time management and discipline. It is important to remember that success comes from working hard, so you should think beyond the task of studying; instead, incorporate study into your daily routine. Time management is an important factor in developing good study habits and skills. In the nursing program, you will be very busy with classes, simulation and skills lab, and clinical experiences. You will need to complete a great deal of reading and assignments and take and pass exams. There are only 24 hours in a day, and you will have a limited number of hours in each day to spend on studying, so you need to use this time as effectively and as efficiently as possible. To help you get started, this chapter discusses some important points for developing these habits and skills. Chapter 1 gives additional study habits and skills as they relate specifically to nursing exams.

How Do You Identify and Plan Your Study Times?

An important part of identifying time for study is using a calendar. The calendar can come in the form of an electronic calendar or the more traditional paper type of calendar. Choose the type that best fits your needs, and let it be your academic life-guide.

At the beginning of each semester, enter your class schedule into your calendar. Once you receive your course syllabus for each course, read it carefully and pay close attention to due dates for assignments and exam dates. Enter these dates in the calendar. In addition, enter into your calendar any other important dates such as extracurricular activities or other personal activities you have scheduled. Carry your calendar with you when you go to class. The instructor may change an assignment due date or an exam date, so you want to be sure that you can make that change in your calendar. Once all this information has been added to your calendar, you can plan your study times.

Your calendar or academic life-guide is critical to your success in effectively managing your time and developing a study plan for the semester. Be sure to look at your calendar every day to plan for the following day. Look ahead to the next week, and note what is scheduled (e.g., an exam) or due (e.g., an assignment). If you are diligent about entering your semester schedule and course requirements into your calendar and reviewing your calendar daily, you can easily manage your time in a busy semester.

What Study Habits Do You Need to Develop?

A habit is a pattern of behavior an individual establishes through repetition of the behavior. Habits can be good or bad, and you need to focus on developing good habits for studying. If you develop good habits and stick to them, you will be successful in the nursing program. You can develop many study habits for yourself, and you may already have some study habits in place you developed while in high school. If you do, and if these worked, integrate these study habits into your college study plan. In addition, use the following top-10 pyramid points and study habits to help plan your study sessions.

Top-10 Pyramid Points and Study Habits

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 1: Plan Daily Specific Times for Studying

Look at your calendar to identify daily times that are free of any other commitments, such as class or clinical obligations, and make these your study times. Block these times off in your calendar as your study times. If you have breaks between classes, use them for study. For example, if you have a class from 8:00 AM to 10:00 AM and do not have another class until 1:00 PM, block out the time between these classes as study time. Set regular study time sessions for each day because this will help establish a routine that becomes part of your school life, and remember that it is acceptable to revise your study time sessions if necessary. In other words, if you find a particular study time is not working, select another time to take its place. During your study time be sure your time is spent on something related to your nursing course work.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 2: Try Not to Do Too Much Studying at One Time

It is better to plan more than one study time per day rather than to plan a lengthy block of study time. In other words, plan more than one study session daily. If you try to do too much studying at one time, you will easily tire and you will not be able to concentrate and retain the information. Your study time will be more effective if you space it over shorter periods of time. Always maintain a positive attitude that you will be successful; you are studying and adequately preparing.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 3: Set Goals for Your Study Time

Think about what you want to accomplish during each study time. Set your goal in writing. This will help you keep focused and concentrate on your task at hand. Then work at meeting your goal. If for whatever reason you are unable to meet your set study time goal, do not become discouraged. Just look at where you left off, revise your goals for your next study session, and keep moving forward on your plan!

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 4: Avoid Procrastination

Stick to your study schedule, and start studying as you planned to do. It is very easy to get off track and procrastinate because "I just do not feel like studying" or "the content or assignment is difficult" or "I would rather be doing something else." If you procrastinate, you will not meet your goals and will need to rush at a later time to complete your work. This places unnecessary stress on you and then you will end up having to cram, so start studying when you planned to. You will feel great after your study session knowing you accomplished a goal.

STUDY TIP

Developing good habits goes beyond attending class, completing assignments, and studying for exams. You also need to have good lifestyle habits, including eating well, getting enough rest, exercising, and having fun. Make sure the fun you have is good, healthy fun and will not cause interruption in your weekly routine.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 5: Study the Most Difficult Material When You Are Most Alert

Some students do best with studying in the early-morning hours, some do better during the daytime hours, and some do best during the evening hours. You need to determine which time is best for you and when you are most rested, are alert, and have the most mental energy. Once you have determined this, use this time to work on your most difficult material. If you have the mental energy and stamina, this difficult material will be easier to grasp.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 6: Find a Special Study Place That Is Free of External Distractions

Your special study area should be quiet and comfortable. It can be your dormitory room, a study lounge, the library, a special room at home, or any other quiet area that works for you. Do not plan to study in a crowded or noisy room, such as a student social lounge, cafeteria, or cafe. Find your special area of tranquility, and post a "do not disturb" sign. Be sure that your cell phone is off and that any other phone or the television is off or far enough away from you so that you will not be distracted. Your study area should be adequate and roomy enough to support your necessary books, notes, and other essentials required to make the study session a success. The lighting in your special study area should be soft and provide the right amount of light to allow easy reading. Remember that temperature control is also critical to your comfort. If it is too hot, you may become sleepy. If it is too cold, you may begin to shiver and have difficulty concentrating. So find a room temperature that is comfortable for you. Remember that your special study area should be quiet and comfortable.

STUDY TIP

When studying, if you find something you are having difficulty understanding, highlight it and make a note of it so you can ask your instructor for clarification during the next scheduled class or clinical time. In addition, take advantage of scheduled office hours for meeting with your instructor if you need extra help.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 7: Seek Help When You Do Not Understand the Material

If you are having difficulty understanding the material, seek help. Remember that in many cases "two heads are better than one." You can ask another student to help explain a difficult content area that you do not understand, but do not ever hesitate to ask your instructor to explain the information to you. During your study session, if you are "stuck" and are not able to understand the information using the resources that are immediately available to you, move on to the next topic. Do not waste your valuable study time. Make note of the information that you do not understand, and seek clarification later. Start the next topic to make the most of the study time you have planned. Make your own "flash cards" to help you remember that difficult-to-learn information.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 8: Plan Study Breaks

Study breaks are important to keep your mind fresh and alert. All people differ in terms of the length of time that they can sit and study and maintain focus to concentrate, so don't compare your study needs to those of other students. How will you know when you need a study break? If you are having difficulty focusing and are moving through content but are not grasping the material, then you need a study break. If you read a page of content but at the end of the page you do not remember what you read, then you need a study break. If you are experiencing "mind chatter" or are thinking about things other than the task you are supposed to be focusing on, then you need a study break. If you are feeling sleepy or hungry, you need a study break.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 9: Eat a Healthy Diet, and Exercise Regularly

Eating a healthy diet will build and maintain your energy level and your stamina to meet your set goals. Did you know that eating fatty foods will slow you down? Yes they will; so you need to avoid fatty foods. As you will learn in nursing school,

nutrition is important for the functioning of every cell in your body. A nurse is also a teacher, and you will be teaching your clients about the importance of eating healthy. So practice what you will be preaching!

Breakfast is an extremely important meal because it starts your day with the fuel that you need to think and perform all the activities ahead of you; however, be sure to eat a *healthy* breakfast. Stay away from bacon, sausage, and high-sugar syrups. Instead, for example, eat a bagel or toast with some peanut butter, cereal, or fruit, and drink some juice. Eat lighter meals and eat more frequently to keep your body fueled and energized. Include complex carbohydrates and protein in your diet for energy. In addition, carry snacks in your backpack for between meals or for your study breaks, but again, be sure that these snacks are healthy ones. Also, be careful not to include too much caffeine in your daily diet. Caffeine will make you jittery and nervous and cause you to have difficulty focusing and concentrating. Remember that a motor vehicle needs gas or it will not run; so think about your body as the motor vehicle needing healthy food to move along and progress efficiently through the day!

Exercising regularly is another extremely important habit to develop. Exercise will enhance or maintain your *physical fitness* and strength and your overall *health*. Regular physical exercise also boosts the immune system, helps prevent disease, and improves your mental health. So get into the habit of exercising regularly. As with healthy eating, you will be teaching your clients about the importance of regular exercise. Again, practice what you will be preaching! What type of exercise should you do? That depends on what you like to do. It can be anything from walking or running to working out at a gym. Even simply getting into the habit of walking to class rather than driving to class will help. Exercise is also a great outlet when you take a study break; take a walk during your break. This will get your circulation flowing, and you will find that your mind will clear and you will be able to focus and concentrate.

Pyramid Point and Study Habit 10: Get an Adequate Amount of Sleep Every Night

Sleep is like food, air, or water. You need it to think and function adequately, and you need it to survive. Lack of an adequate amount of sleep will cause mental, emotional, and physical fatigue and irritability. Think about it—do you want to go into a classroom to take an exam feeling irritable or mentally, emotionally, or physically fatigued? Of course not, because then you are placing yourself at risk for failure. If you develop a schedule for studying and stick to it, then you will not have to worry about being up all night preparing for an exam the next day. One of the worst things that you can do is to cram the night before an exam and stay up all night studying. If you do this, it will be very difficult to focus and concentrate while taking the exam. If you have developed a structured study plan and stuck to it, the night before the exam will require simply a review of the content. So get into the habit of going to bed at night at a specific time that will provide you with an adequate amount (6 to 8 hours) of quality sleep.

Do you have difficulty falling asleep? If you do, this is probably because you are lying in bed thinking about all sorts of things, such as everything that you need to get done over the next day, the next week, and the remainder of the semester; or you may have other sorts of things on your mind. Whatever it may be that is keeping you awake needs to be eliminated from your mind. How do you do this? This may be a trial-and-error sort of task that will require implementing various measures or strategies to help you fall asleep until you find the one that will work for you. Remember that a measure that works for someone else may not work for you; however, if you determine what will work for you and get into the habit of implementing this measure repetitively, you will find that you will easily be able to fall asleep at night. Some measures to help you fall asleep are listed in the following box.

STUDY TIP

It is sometimes difficult to build exercise into your daily routine when you are a busy nursing student. Find a time during the day that works best for you to build in even 15 to 20 minutes of physical exercise of some form. If you want to exercise on a higher intensity level, plan to do so on fewer days. For example, if you are exercising intensely for longer periods of time, plan this form of exercise on 2 to 3 days out of the week. If you are exercising mildly or moderately, exercise every day but for shorter amounts of time. It is helpful in planning a routine to exercise at the same time every day. Adopting 1 of these habits will ensure that you are able to fit exercise into your busy schedule.

NCLEX® EXAM TIP

When you graduate from nursing school and are preparing to take the NCLEX exam, remember that you have been successful up to this point. Therefore, the study habits and study skills that you used during your nursing education were effective. Use these same study habits and study skills to prepare for the NCLEX exam!

**Measures to Promote Sleep**

- Develop a time schedule for when you will go to bed at night.
- Avoid taking naps during the day.
- Avoid consuming caffeine-containing drinks and foods.
- Eat healthy and exercise regularly (avoid exercise within 3 or 4 hours of bedtime because activity increases metabolism and alertness for a few hours).
- Avoid eating heavily close to bedtime.
- Adjust the room temperature to meet your physical needs; a cool environment is best.
- Keep the lights off in the room at bedtime.
- Ensure a quiet environment; place a "sleeping" sign on your door, and use comfortable earplugs if necessary.
- Turn your clock around or place it in a drawer so that you cannot see it.
- Perform a relaxation technique, such as reading; slow, deep breathing; or meditating.
- Use a natural sleep remedy, such as drinking a cup of warm caffeine-free tea.

What Study Skills Are Important?

Effective study skills develop once you have your study schedule in place and begin to implement your plan of study. Effective study skills also develop from good study habits. You may already have effective study skills in place that you developed when you were in high school; if you do and these worked for you, continue with these study skills during your nursing education. Remember that everyone is different, and what may work for someone else may not work for you. So it is important to know what works for you! This chapter provides some of the many study skills that you can implement.

▲ Good Listening Skills

It is vital to your success that you become a good listener. Listen, and get to know your instructor. Listen carefully for verbal indicators made by your instructor that will alert you to what is important to note. Some verbal indicators are statements that begin with the words: "Never forget ...," "Please understand ...," or "This is definitely on the NCLEX exam." Listen to the inflection of your instructor's voice, and if he or she suddenly accents some content area, take that note. If your instructor becomes more animated during part of the lecture, pay attention and take note of that content. Finally, whatever the instructor reviews in class is worth highlighting because it will likely be on the next exam as an exam question.

If you are going to succeed as a good listener, you must get your mind prepared before arriving to class. You must leave the daydreaming and "mind chatter" at home and come to class ready to pay close attention to every word the instructor speaks. You may not always find the content being discussed interesting, but keep in mind that you will be tested on the material, and it is your responsibility to listen and learn.

Always pay attention to what your instructor may write on a classroom board or provide in a handout. If the instructor takes the time to write or diagram something on a board or in a handout, you can be fairly certain that this information will turn up on the exam as an exam question.

▲ Effective Note Taking

Be sure to bring everything you need, such as your notebook, pens, pencils, highlighters, computer, or tablet. Your notebook should have index inserts so you will be able to label sections as necessary, and the binder needs to be secure enough to hold the notebook and any handout material that the instructor distributes to the class. Highlight any key points during the lecture. You may be allowed

to bring your laptop computer to class for taking notes. If so, be sure that your computer battery is fully charged and you have easy access to an electrical outlet for recharging. Many teachers will provide PowerPoint presentations. You can take notes in the notes section of the PowerPoint as it is covered during class. If the teacher doesn't use PowerPoint presentations or doesn't lecture during class, notes should be taken during in-class activities such as case studies, group discussions, or simulation.

Good note taking is a talent that requires practice and good listening skills. First, remember that you are taking notes, not writing a novel. You cannot write down every word that the instructor says. Develop a personal shorthand that will help you transcribe the important points of your instructor's lecture. For example, the instructor may say, "The signs and symptoms include nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea." Your shorthand note could read, "S&S = N/V/D." With practice you can develop an abbreviated note-taking style that will work successfully for you. Also, most students find that rewriting their notes after class is a good study habit because it clarifies and reinforces what they have read and learned in class. You may find this strategy valuable to add to your study regimen. Some additional points related to effective note taking are provided in Chapter 1.

STUDY TIP

As a nursing student, you will be documenting in the medical record on your assigned clients. Remember that when documenting in a medical record you can only use acceptable agency abbreviations. Always follow agency guidelines for using abbreviations when documenting.

Reading Skills

In nursing, reading involves active involvement with your textbook. Plan to do detailed reading to extract information accurately. In other words, do not scan or skim the content in the textbook chapter. In addition, always have a medical/nursing dictionary with you when you study; when you come across a word that you never heard of (e.g., edema, which means swelling), look it up and make note of it in your notebook as a new vocabulary word. Chapter 1 provides strategies to implement when you are reading your textbook. Some additional strategies include the following:

1. Read one section at a time under each major heading. Highlight the key points. Develop some questions that come to mind, and write these questions in your notebook. Find the answers to the questions, and if necessary, plan to bring the question to class for further clarification.
2. After you finish reading some of the sections under major headings, look again at the questions that you developed and think about the answers. If you were not able to recall the answers, review these sections in the text again. Then continue reading the chapter.
3. After you have read the entire chapter, review all the highlighted key points and any notes that you made, and review the questions that you have developed to see if you can answer them. If you cannot, then review these areas in the chapter again. It may also be helpful to make a flash card for any information that is difficult.

Interactive Learning

Many textbooks are bundled with electronic interactive learning resources. It is recommended that you read the chapter first, then use the interactive learning and quizzing resources to reinforce what was learned. These resources typically utilize a questioning format and produce results reflecting student progress. Students can use this report to determine if more studying is required and what content they should focus on.

Remembering Content

Remembering what you have listened to in class and remembering what you read and study are essential for your success in passing exams, success in future nursing courses, and success on the NCLEX exam. If you are unable to remember what

you learned, then you will be unable to apply the information in future nursing courses, in the clinical setting, or on the NCLEX exam. Some strategies for remembering content include rewriting class notes, reading your class notes every day, doing the required reading before coming to class, highlighting key points in your textbook as you read, completing study guides provided for you, and creating flash cards for the material that is difficult for you. Chapter 1 provides points related to these strategies.

An additional strategy that you can use to remember content is to develop an acronym; a mnemonic device; or easily remembered letters, words, or phrases for difficult information. Many times your instructor will identify ways to remember difficult information, but you can develop these on your own or with your classmates. Three examples of these are regular and NPH insulin, decorticate versus decerebrate posturing, and MAOIs.

Regular Insulin and NPH Insulin—RN

RN—When mixing regular and NPH insulin in the same syringe, draw up the **Regular** insulin first, followed by the **NPH** insulin. Remember the acronym **RN** when mixing both these types of insulin in the same syringe.

Tip for the nursing student: Insulin is a medication that is prescribed for some clients with diabetes mellitus. Many times it is necessary to administer both regular and NPH insulin, and these insulins may need to be mixed in the same syringe. There is a procedure for mixing these insulins, and it is important to draw the regular insulin into the syringe first. You will learn about this procedure when you study medication administration. You will also learn about this procedure in your medical-surgical nursing course when you study endocrine disorders.

Decorticate Posturing versus Decerebrate Posturing

In **decorticate** (flexor) posturing, the upper extremities (arms, wrists, fingers) are flexed on the chest. In other words, the upper extremities are brought to the **core** of the body; whereas in **decerebrate** (extensor) posturing, the upper extremities are stiffly extended with internal rotation and pronation of the palms. Therefore, when trying to distinguish the characteristics of each type of posturing, remember that in **decorticate**, the upper extremities are brought to the **core** of the body.

Tip for the nursing student: Posturing is an abnormal position assumed by a client with a neurological disorder and indicates deterioration in the client's condition. You will learn about posturing in your medical-surgical nursing course when you study neurological disorders.

STUDY TIP

As a student in the clinical environment, you will create your own acronyms to use in certain situations, such as an acronym for an electrocardiogram (ECG) pattern and its interpretation. These acronyms will assist you in nursing practice, but remember that these cannot be used for documentation unless they are acceptable for use by the clinical agency.

Monoamine Oxidase Inhibitors (MAOIs)

MAOIs are antidepressants and include the following medications:

Phenelzine sulfate
Tranylcypromine sulfate
Isocarboxazid
Selegiline

Remembering the acronym **PTIS** as meaning **Please Take It Seriously** will assist in remembering the medications that belong in the MAOI classification.

Tip for the nursing student: MAOIs are medications that are used to treat depression. Adverse effects are associated with this classification of medications, and clients must follow specific dietary measures when taking them. Therefore, it is important to know which medications are in the classification of MAOIs. You will learn about MAOIs in your pharmacology and your psychiatric/mental health nursing courses.

Critical Thinking Skills

Critical thinking skills involve an intellectual process of actively analyzing information. It is essential that you develop good critical thinking skills because you will be making very important decisions in the clinical setting when you care for clients. In the clinical setting, you will gather information and then will need to analyze, synthesize, and apply this information, make decisions, and evaluate the outcome.

Critical thinking skills take time to develop, but if you are mindful of the fact that you need to develop these skills, you can set some goals for yourself regarding becoming a critical thinker. So what can you do to develop critical thinking skills? One strategy that you can begin with is curiosity. Consistently ask yourself questions as you read nursing content. Write these questions in your notebook and then present them in class for discussion. This discussion will generate critical thinking among your classmates. Another strategy to develop critical thinking skills is to learn content from an analytical perspective. In other words, be creative. Look at a collection of information that you are learning, and instead of simply learning the facts, think about the information in an investigative manner. For example, if you are learning about standard precautions (a basic level of infection control that should be used in the care of all clients all of the time to reduce the risk of transmission of microorganisms), do not simply remember that handwashing must be done before and after contact with a client or that gloves are worn when coming in contact with blood or body fluid excretions and secretions. Think about this content critically, and question *why* these procedures need to be followed. Critical thinking takes more time and energy than simply learning facts and content, but it is an essential part of the learning process in nursing. So work at it, and make it a habit to be curious and creative and think about things critically.

STUDY TIP

An integral part of your success as a student in clinical is your ability to think critically. You will be assigned to care for a client (or clients) and will be required to interpret pertinent information regarding the client's status and determine the important nursing considerations with regard to client care. Gather all of your client's information before the clinical session and think critically by determining why certain medications and treatments are prescribed for the client and why the client may have a certain laboratory result or diagnostic finding.

When Should You Start to Study for an Exam?

Studying for an exam begins the moment your course begins and you start reading your textbooks, attending class, and taking notes. Always pay close attention to the syllabus for upcoming test dates and use the syllabus as a planning guide. Plan and schedule daily study sessions for yourself, and read your class notes taken up to that point, with a particular focus on your new notes, the notes taken that day. This is an important part of preparing for an exam so that you will not be faced with cramming the night before. Procrastinating and waiting until the last minute to prepare for an exam are two of the worst things that you can do because these place unnecessary pressure on you and set the stage for developing test anxiety. So start preparing right away. One week before a scheduled exam, increase the time that you spend in your study session. The amount of time that you need to plan for your study sessions depends on the type of learner that you are and how quickly you are able to grasp the new content and material. A guideline that you may want to use to begin scheduling your study sessions is to plan 1 hour of study for every 3 hours of class time. So, for example, if your nursing class is scheduled for 3 hours, then plan for a 1-hour review of your notes after the class. Then 1 week before the exam, increase the time that you spend in each study session to 2 hours of study for every 3 hours of class time. This is only a guideline to help you think about planning and is not a rigid rule that needs to be strictly followed. Remember that everyone is different when it comes to learning needs, so think about what works best for you and plan accordingly. Chapter 1 provides additional information regarding using your class notes to prepare for an exam.

Will a Study Group Work for You?

This question is one that only you can answer. If the idea of studying in a group environment has worked for you in the past and you feel comfortable with this type of study arena, by all means continue this way of studying. If you are the type

of learner who needs to be alone to study in order to master the content, then a study group will not work. Some combination of alone study time and group study time may also be an option for you. In other words, you can plan to study on your own, and once you are comfortable with the content and think that you have mastered it, join a study group to help reinforce content.

Study groups can be very helpful when preparing for an exam, but the study team needs to be motivated and stay on track with regard to the goal of the group. A study group can easily get off track and waste time discussing "outside of study" issues. If this happens, then the goals of the group may not be met. Be sure to join a study group that has the same goals as you, and be sure that your study partners have personalities that are compatible with yours so that you can easily work together. This will help with motivating and driving each other to meet group goals.

The size of the study group should be between three and five, and every group member needs to come to the study time prepared to participate. When the study group is initially created, group goals and expectations should be developed. Each study session should have established goals and work to achieve the study goals within the study time. Each group member should accept a task with regard to the contribution or role he or she will take as a member of the group. For example, if the content for a scheduled exam includes the medical-surgical areas of angina, myocardial infarction, and heart failure, then each group member should accept a topic area or a part of it for presentation at the study group session. At the end of each study session, the group members should decide when the next study group session will be, what the goals for the session will be, and each member's assignment. Remember that study groups are made of individuals and each individual is a part of the team. If each team member contributes to the study session as planned, then the team will succeed. Chapter 1 provides additional information about study groups.