

Overcoming Intellectual Despair

Comprehending College Textbooks by Joe Cortina

The keys to overcoming intellectual despair are to realize that everyone occasionally feels discouraged, to know that you do not have to give in to these feelings of hopelessness, and to acquire the reading skills needed to handle college textbooks.

What can you do? First, be patient with yourself. Some subjects will be harder for you. Plan to spend more time on them; this alone can work wonders. Seek extra help if you need it—from the instructor, from a tutor, from a classmate or from other, simpler books on the same subject.

Break a big assignment into smaller parts. Decide that you are not going to quit until you read and understand at least one section or small part of the assigned chapter. Once you have mastered one small section, your self-esteem will be higher and you will have the confidence and motivation to tackle the next section. If a particular assignment becomes too frustrating, put it down for a while and come back to it later. Study another subject, take a walk, or exercise to clear your mind.

If you don't understand an idea or concept, try to pinpoint exactly what it is that you don't understand. This sometimes clears it up. At the very least, you will have your questions ready to ask the instructor or someone else who can help.

It might be useful to you to ask successful classmates or the instructor for their suggestions for doing well in the class and for handling the textbook effectively. Sometimes a “study buddy” or a study group can make a dramatic improvement in your grade (and provide a welcome support group). Be sure to choose your study partner carefully – and be sure to uphold your responsibility by coming to the study session as prepared as possible and with your questions clearly in mind.

Finally, remember that you don't have to love a subject in order to do well in it (although it makes it more enjoyable). Try to replace your negative self-talk (“I can't do this”, “I'm going to fail”, “I've never been any good at this stuff”) with positive self-talk (“Even if I can't understand all of this assignment I'll stay with it until I've learned at least one new thing”, “Other people have learned this; I can too”, “I'm not going to let this defeat me”). A positive attitude, determination, and willingness to work hard separate successful students from unsuccessful ones. Successful students don't believe that their success comes from luck. Geniuses are rare. If you succeed, it will be because you made the effort to succeed. And you can feel very good about that accomplishment.