

Fail-Proof Tips for Adults Back at School

by Elizabeth Weiss McGolerick

Full-time job, family, and friends - these commitments are challenging enough to juggle without the added education factor. How can you make the school reentry process as seamless as possible? Check out these study tips, college support services, and insider strategies to get you started on your own personal back-to-school transition.

The art of time management

Stephen Gatlin, president and CEO of Gatlin Education Services, which provides online workforce development programs to colleges, considers time management the biggest factor in back-to-school success. He recommends that students determine when they focus best, such as in the morning or at night, before caffeine or after. Then, Gatlin says, "Reserve time to dedicate to your course. Stay committed and treat [that time] like an appointment that can't be budgeted."

Frank Hilty, a mining engineer with the John T. Boyd Company, has experienced the back-to-school adjustment twice. He returned to college to complete his bachelor's degree 12 years after starting, and now, eight years after earning that degree, he's pursuing an MBA at Waynesburg College. Hilty, who blocks out two to three hours of study time for every hour of in-class time, advises, "If you are working, you must treat class work as a part-time job with specific responsibilities. Do not procrastinate. Even if you only take one course at a time, you will find yourself quickly overwhelmed if you let the work pile up. Our regular jobs and families have a way, and they should, of commanding our attention."

Jason Yapple, a geologist who has been taking courses at Penn State and West Chester University of Pennsylvania to earn a professional geology certification, echoes these sentiments. "Figure out the amount of time you will need to study and perform the coursework. Then be prepared to invest even more time."

Especially for adults

According to a study of Florida's 28 community colleges, 20 percent more students who enrolled in for-credit success courses, such as note-taking, test-taking, and time management, achieved academic success - a degree, certificate, or transfer for further study - than those who did not enroll.

The Center for Adult Students at Penn State Erie, The Behrend College, offers what Director Bidy Brooks calls a "one-stop-shop" for adult learners. "The Center provides academic advising, counseling, and support services," along with their Academic Enhancement Series of workshops and seminars that covers "soft skills" like time and stress management, computer and study skills, and exploration of majors. "There was a need to provide this type of information and do it in a manner that addressed the unique needs and situations of returning adults," Brooks explains.

Because the opportunity for study time can be rare, Brooks recommends always carrying a pen and paper in order to jot down thoughts to reference later, and making note cards to review in spare time, "like while you're waiting for the kids at soccer practice." She also suggests, "Turn *some* of your at-home study time into family study time. This allows children to feel like part of the process, and you all share in completing your homework for the day."

Budding technophiles

Being out of school for a while doesn't only challenge adults to get back into the groove of studying. Schools have implemented technology into their curricula in a vast number of forms. So, while some adults plan to earn their certificate or degree as efficiently as possible in order to move on to better opportunities, the adventure isn't always as simple as merely mastering a chosen major. Brooks cautions, "Brush up on basic computer skills. You cannot function in today's classroom without them."

Online education has made going back to school a reality for many adults - especially those with children - but this method of learning brings with it new trials. John Franek is a full-time zoning officer and Upper Iowa University Online student working toward his bachelor's degree in public administration after being out of school for 18 years. Although he is comfortable with computers, Franek admits, "I continually battle with technical issues regarding glitches and server access." Thankfully, many schools offer access to a live help desk.

Matt Smythe is an advertising agency writer who postponed college to join the Army. After serving for eight years, he enrolled in Finger Lakes Community College and graduated with a degree in environmental science and biochemistry. Smythe recommends students "get comfortable with technology, especially online bulletin boards, town-hall style discussions, e-mail, and chat correspondence."

Brushing up on basics

For those who dread a back-to-school experience dominated by computers, follow the lead of Michele Thompson, a writer pursuing a master's degree in mental health counseling at Montana State University. "I can't believe all the students who bring laptops into classes and type notes. I'm still 'old school' and write out my notes," she says. "The actual writing helps me remember."

One skill adults may treasure is the ability to tune things out, but Smythe advises brushing up on listening skills. He also suggests reading as much as possible and journaling to become comfortable with getting thoughts out on paper. Franek advises, "Definitely take English composition classes. If you don't have [writing skills] under your belt, you're behind before you even start."

Yaple sets his stock on reviewing old exams. "Some professors provide copies of tests and quizzes from previous years on reserve in the library. These are invaluable for getting a feel for the type and style of questions that may be asked on exams."

Accommodating unique situations

Even though the opportunities for back-to-school study are many, there are some adults who feel as though a foray into education eludes them because of physical or mental disabilities. But colleges and universities are adjusting their offerings to accommodate a wide variety of needs and situations.

In 2003, Aaron Rowles was employed as a construction worker and logger when he suffered a traumatic brain injury on the job. Though he is still coping with the side effects of his post-concussion syndrome, including memory problems and word-finding skills, Rowles says, "The day I left rehab, I made a commitment to myself to not let this keep me down."

The now 30-year-old enrolled at Edinboro University in 2005, a decade after his high school graduation, and is now a dean's list student pursuing a degree in secondary education/social studies. Rowles attributes much of his back-to-school success to Edinboro's Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). "They have provided peer mentors who help me study and learn the techniques I need to earn a college degree."

OSD also provides refresher courses, though Rowles independently attended note-taking and test-taking classes as well. "If I wouldn't have had these opportunities, it would have been very hard to get the grades I have."

The personal touch

It can be intimidating to reenter a classroom after time away. Brooks believes that a positive frame of mind and motivation influence success. And, rather than being a wallflower, she advises, "Ask questions, make friends with traditional-aged students, and learn from [each other]." Thompson agrees that getting to know your instructors and peers provides "a better sense of belonging and comfort and can make your college experience more enjoyable and enriching."

Yaple also offers guidance about melding school with personal life. "Take care of any pressing issues at home beforehand if possible and be prepared to ask for help at home if you start to feel overwhelmed. Visit the library to scope out a potential location to study to avoid distractions."

Rowles says the best tip he ever received was this: "Study for an hour, then take a break to retain what you've learned. You can't get the grades you want unless you study, but if you try to study for hours on end, you usually don't remember everything." He also advises nontraditional students stay in tune with their body's needs and get rest. Brooks adds, "Realize the out-of-classroom time commitment and don't be afraid to say no to family and friends. Know yourself and your limits."

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