



Advice Harvard College Seniors Wish Someone Had Given Them when They Were Freshmen

Copyright © 1990, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 President and Fellows of Harvard College

The following advice has been gleaned from Harvard seniors looking back on their experience as freshmen. We at the Bureau of Study Counsel, at the same time that we appreciate the wisdom of such advice, are mindful that even the best advice has its limitations. When we showed this handout to a Harvard student shortly after the completion her freshman year, she reminded us of what Abigail Lipson and David Perkins refer to as “the uselessness of useful advice.”* She told us that even though she had heard and heeded much of this sort of advice along the way – from fellow students, from an older sister who had gone to Harvard, and from various grown-ups in the College – she had found that, in her experience, there were plenty of exceptions to these recommendations and that much of what was most useful to her learning that first year was the freedom to muck around and learn from her own direct experience. She also reminded us that the point is not to operate on the assumption that if you just follow the right advice you will have a perfect freshman year.

- 1. Give everyone a chance.** Don't write off people who are different from you are or who are different from what you are used to. Take advantage of that awkward time in Annenberg at the start of school when you can sit down next to anyone and strike up a conversation. Better yet, maintain that sense of openness throughout your time at Harvard, and you will expand your horizons and avoid feeling in a social rut.
- 2. Set new measures for success,** like making headway toward discovering what deeply engages you or addressing an academic weakness. Resist the temptation to play it safe by only demonstrating your strengths. Focusing on a flawless transcript serves no one well.
- 3. Take courses you're interested in,** and don't be afraid to change academic direction. If you are engaged in learning something that interests or excites you, the coursework will feel worth your time and effort; if you aren't interested in what you are studying, the workload will feel burdensome.
- 4. Get involved in extracurricular activities.** This is a great way to explore new interests and to develop old ones. Challenge yourself by trying something outside your comfort zone. Extracurricular activities are meant to be enjoyable. If an activity is becoming a chronic burden or something you dread, it might be time to rethink it.
- 5. Get to know at least one faculty member and/or a teaching fellow.** Taking small classes – like freshman seminars and language courses – helps. As does going to office hours. You don't have to have a specific question. Teachers love to hear how a class is going for you. Many will welcome your asking them how they got interested in their field. The relationship you develop can prove to be a valuable resource as you plot your academic path and begin applying for summer experiences, fellowships. etc.
- 6. Join (or form) a study group.** There is no reason to go it alone, whether it is studying for an exam, working on a problem set, or staying on top of weekly readings. Study groups can help clarify and crystallize course content, as long as you are putting in your fair share of the work. (**NOTE:** Be sure to check course guidelines before consulting or collaborating with others on graded assignments.)
- 7. Speak up.** Don't let a fear of sounding stupid keep you from asking questions. Asking questions, even about the basics – *especially* about the basics – is essential to learning. Chances are someone else shares your confusion. Don't be afraid to contribute your thoughts and opinions to class discussions. While you might worry about

* “The Uselessness of Useful Advice” is the title of the preface to *Block: The New Psychology of Counterintentional Behavior in Everyday Life*, by A. Lipson and D. N. Perkins, 1990, Lyle Stuart Publishers, pp. 15-17.

being perceived as talking too much, trust that you will be able to gauge how to participate in a shared dialogue. Listen to what others say, and build from their contributions. Often when we “take” air space to share a perspective or to ask what might seem like a basic question, we also “give” others a chance to consider a new point of view (and our speaking up may also give them the courage to risk speaking up themselves).

8. Use your resources. Harvard faculty, deans, residential staff, and student support staff are available to help you, but they are not likely to come knocking on your door to see if you need help. Writing a research paper? Check out the resources available at the libraries and at the Harvard College Writing Center. Feeling buried in your workload or distracted by things that are happening at home? Reach out to the Bureau of Study Counsel, and check out some of their workshops and the chance to meet one-on-one with an academic counselor.

9. Expand your sources beyond the Internet, and keep track of your ideas. As the tech generation, we are trained to think we can find anything at the click of a button, but there is no substitute for thumbing through books in the library stacks. You never know what you might find on the shelf next to the book you thought you needed. When you are taking notes for a research paper, keep track of which ideas are your own and which ideas you need to attribute to another author. And do this as you go along to avoid problems later.

10. Don't expect to read every word. Learn to read selectively. Use the first couple of classes and sections as indicators for what you should be focusing on when you read. While you will need to read some things closely, you are not expected to know every last detail of every reading; you should be able to understand and analyze main ideas and arguments and be able to consider evidence to create your own arguments.

11. Get into a routine. Keep those things that you liked about your high school routine, such as eating breakfast every morning or hitting the gym a few days a week. Try to find a regular sleep schedule, even if you go to bed at an hour that would horrify your family. Make a schedule for yourself (whether electronic, hard copy, or both) so that you keep track of classes, extracurricular activities, meetings, social plans, etc. and build some balance into your life.

12. Leave “give” in your days and weeks for downtime and for the little things that make you happy and that can provide perspective. In trying to create a sense of balance in your life, leave room for true downtime (which might be different from social time), for personal reflection, and for your own version of doing nothing. Some of the most enlivening and transformative experiences in life happen in unscheduled or underscheduled time.

Revised August 2015