

Minimise Study Time Maximise Scores



HSC Exam/Study Tip # 6: Turning Study into a Habit

Leaving things to the last minute or pulling all-nighters may have gotten you decent grades in your middle school years. But these less-than-ideal routines are unlikely to lead to success in your HSC.

During the HSC, it's important to do things systematically and progressively, otherwise, you'll never get the marks you're capable of. And the least painful way of doing this is to **build study into your daily routine**. Routines and habits are the key to consistency, which is the key to achieving goals.

What are Habits?

A habit is an action you do frequently and automatically in response to something in your environment.

As an example, every morning after getting out of bed, I visit the bathroom and then wash my hands and teeth. I don't make the decision to brush my teeth each morning and I don't brush my teeth each time I go to the bathroom. Instead, because of my environment and the cues around me (morning-bathroom-wash hands), I do it automatically.

Environmental cues trigger specific responses and we can use this phenomenon to develop new habits. When it comes to study, all you need to do is to create or identify an environmental cue that is likely to occur just before you should be studying, such as your after-school snack.

A more successful way of developing a new habit is to add it to **an established habit or routine**.

A study investigating the development of flossing teeth as a habit took two groups and monitored them across 8 months. The first group was told to floss after washing their teeth whereas the second group were asked to floss before brushing. After 8 months, the group that flossed after brushing had stronger flossing habits. Having a cue made it easier to remember to floss, and after a while, the association between flossing and brushing was forged and became automatic.

Establishing a Habit

Step 1: Identify your goal.

This will help you decide on the specific actions that move you in the right direction.

Goal: To study for 3 hours each weekday after school.

Step 2: To create a new habit, add it immediately after an existing habit.

You don't want to have to constantly be making decisions about whether you're going to study now or in 45 minutes – that approach is a recipe for procrastination! People who make a plan for exactly when and where they'll perform a new habit are more likely to follow through.

Action: I will start studying after my after-school snack.

Step 3: Construct a “trigger-action” statement and repeat it as often as you can each day.

Pick a trigger (the “if”) and an action (the “then”) and form a statement.

For example:

“If I wash my teeth then I will floss”.

“Once I have my snack, then I’ll start studying.”

These statements provide a simple yet powerful formula for changing behaviours through indoctrination and reinforcement.

Step 4: Develop positive environmental cues.

Make adjustments to the spaces where you live and study to increase your exposure to positive cues and reduce your exposure to negative ones. For example, store textbooks in visible sight, display study timetables, put up motivating posters addressing the benefits of studying or not procrastinating and have snacks on hand. If the habit you’re trying to create isn’t particularly pleasant, you should do it with one of your favourite things at the same time. For example, if there’s a snack that you particularly like, have it while you’re studying. You’ll associate the two activities together (study and favorite snack) making it easier to execute the task you don’t enjoy.

Step 5: Remove negative environmental cues.

What things stop you from studying?

Maybe seeing the TV on is enough to convince you to procrastinate your studies. If that’s the case, make sure that you don’t go anywhere near the TV. Social media is a big temptation, so keep all electronic items not needed for studying out of your study area. Form a pact with friends to keep away from social media until an agreed time i.e. until study has been completed for the day. A messy desk is often enough to put a stressed or tired student off their studies, so make sure that you clean your desk and sort all paperwork after finishing your studies each night.

Step 6: Make it easy.

If you want to get fit you could join a gym that’s on your way home from school. This removes the effort of having to go out of your way to get to a gym. You could also get your gym kit ready the night before so there’s no valid reason to procrastinate. Where studying is concerned, you could stop off at a local library, sort out your homework and set up your study area with everything you need the night before.

Very importantly, start small. The idea of a 3 hour study session is likely to put most students off, but a 30 minute study session is very manageable. The important thing is to create the habit of studying at a set time – the length of the study session can be slowly increased or extended to the 3 hours once the habit of studying is in place.

Step 6: Use small, regular, related rewards.

Unfortunately, the human brain has evolved to prioritise immediate rewards over delayed rewards. So, if you want to get a habit to stick, you need to figure out a way to give yourself an immediate reward.

Good rewards have three key characteristics. They:

1. Occur immediately after the action
2. Are actually related to the action
3. Are small

A great example of a reward is social media. Other suggestions include a small sweet, playing your favourite music out loud, watching a program on TV, meditating for half an hour. But whatever you choose, make sure that you don't use that reward during other times.

Note: It's important to make your habits satisfying because you're more likely to repeat a behaviour when you find the experience satisfying.

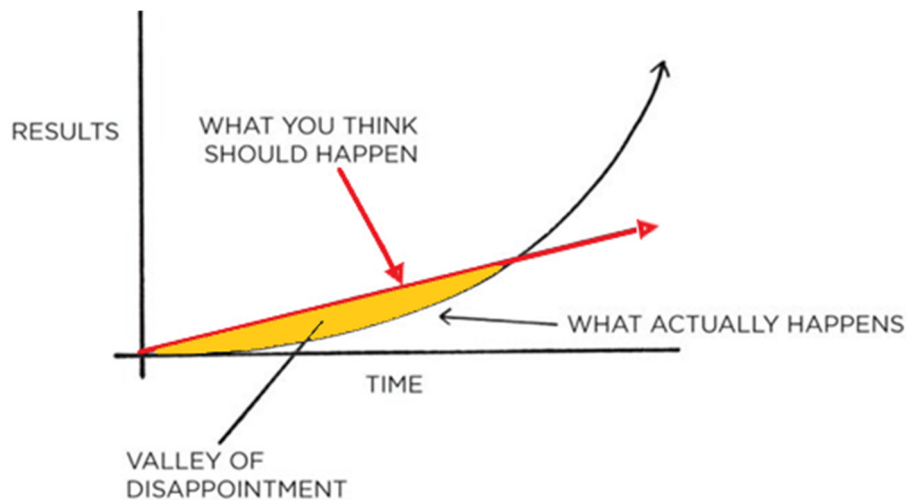
How Long Does it Take to Create a Habit?

That depends on the habit you're creating and on your ability to control your immediate environment. If you add the new habit to an existing one and follow the advice in this tip, plan on it taking between 25 and 60 days to turn study into a habit (Eur J Soc Psychology).



Note:

Do not give up if you don't see any progress for some time. Habits appear to make no difference until we cross a threshold and unlock a new level of performance, as shown in the graph below. Habits need to persist long enough to break through the valley of disappointment, which is why it's challenging to build habits – people give up before they see the fruit of their efforts.



Note:

NASA scientists outfitted a group of astronauts with a pair of convex goggles which flipped everything in their field of vision 180 degrees. In other words, their world was literally turned upside down. The astronauts had to wear these goggles 24 hours a day, 7 days per week—even when they were asleep.

Between days 26-30 of the experiment, the astronauts began to see the world right-side up again, even though they continued to wear the goggles 24 hours a day. The astronauts' brains actually created neural pathways that "rewired" their brains to see their worlds normally again.

What the scientists learned from these experiments is that the brain requires approximately 30 uninterrupted days for new neural connections to form – for new habits to form. By 60 days it's very much a part of who you are – a solid habit that doesn't require deliberate thought or effort to be implemented.

So go and get started on your new study habit! Make the commitment today and reap the rewards at the end of the year.

Regards,
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