

How to Study for General Psychology

"The purpose of psychology is to give us a completely different idea of the things we know best."

-Paul Valery

I believe that many (not all) students, who enroll in a psychology course, enter the class with several stereotypes about the subject. Some students may think that psychology is all about focusing on therapy and mental illness. Others may think that psychology is all about running rats through mazes or making pigeons peck a lever to get food. Still, other students may be familiar with the pop-cultural phenomenon of *paranormal psychology* (e.g. T.V. shows like *Ghost Hunters*, *Medium*, *Heroes*, etc.). And, other students may simply believe that because psychology is the study of how folks think and act, then it should be a breeze to succeed in; they think to themselves, "I'm a person. I think and act. So, it should be easy for me to understand psychology."

However, psychology students quickly realize that the subject covers an enormous assortment of material, and that this material may not be content that students are even remotely familiar with from their "pop-culture" understanding of the subject.

Psychology is formally defined as "the study of behavior and mental processes" (which is very different from the *study of how folks think and act...*believe me!). At Columbia State, the *General Psychology (PSYC 1030)* course covers a wide range of topics including:

- history and research methods,
- biological basis of behavior,
- varieties of consciousness,
- cognition,
- human development,
- psychology of personality,
- motivational processes,
- social psychology, and
- mental illness and its treatments.



Psychology Symbol

Because psychology consists of such a broad range of topics, it is important to develop ways of effectively studying and mastering new theories and concepts. Do you just read the chapters and hope it sinks in? No. Do you practice psychology on your friends, partner or spouse, or pets? Maybe, but you'll need to do more than that to get good grades in psychology. Once you develop good study habits for this or any social science course, you'll ensure good academic performance.

Following are some pretty basic but good study tips for psychology:

1. **Explain the psychological theories or concepts.** The best way to learn psychology is to teach it. If you're trying to memorize, for example, the *Seven Major Perspectives in Psychology*, or *Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory*, or *Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Development*, try explaining what you do know about these concepts to a fellow psychology student. To study for psychology classes, it really does help to work through the concepts verbally.
2. **ATTEND CLASS and actively listen in your psychology lectures.** "Active listening" means reading the assigned chapters before class, comparing what you read with what the psychology professor is saying, and jotting down or even asking questions in class (or after the lecture is over). Of course, you can't actively listen if you are not attending class. Regular class attendance is essential to any college learning experience. Most of the psychology instructors at Columbia State make regular and active attendance a mandatory requirement in their course.
3. **Study in "drips and drabs."** This study tip is also referred to as *distributed-practice approach to studying*. If you are being tested over four chapters, instead of tackling all four chapters the night before the exam (like many students do), study for an hour or two a day far in advance. If you study

for short periods of time way before the psychology test, you'll not only recall it easier during the exam, you'll also remember it longer.

4. **Set a study schedule.** To study for psychology and all your other classes, create and stick to a study schedule. You may find it effective to study each subject for 30 minutes a day, or you may be more comfortable studying in two or three hour blocks. Experiment with different study schedules until you find what works for you—and then stick with your plan!
5. **Compare what you're learning to "real" life.** (This is my favorite psychology study tip, because it works!) Psychology ultimately seeks to understand human beings. The only way to understanding "us" is by relating and applying the theories and concepts in psychology to the real world. Take Freud's Psychosexual Stages of Development, for example. Have you found that to be true with your little sister or brother, your own children, or the kids down the block? To get good grades in psychology class, apply what you read and hear to your reality. If it doesn't fit, discuss it with your fellow psychology students or your professor.
6. **Learn to identify key information.** This tip it works for all your courses. Practice seeing what's really important in the chapter. For instance, the case studies that develop certain concepts are interesting, but they're not necessarily going to be on the exam. Psychology case studies illustrate the concepts so you can understand them, but they're not usually worth memorizing. An effective way to study for psychology is to train yourself to identify the key concepts and points.
7. **Read related material.** If you're in a first year psychology class, the concepts and terms may be foreign and unfamiliar. To get used to psychological theories, read psychology journal articles or magazines. Columbia State has a great library with outstanding electronic databases, just spilling over with psychology journal articles and magazines. The more you're exposed to psychology, the easier it gets. An even stronger psychology study tip involves reading articles written by or about the psychologist you're studying (for example, if you're studying Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, read a current research article or two about Albert Bandura).

In closing, just know this: Anything worth doing is never easy. Yeah...I know it's a cliché, but it is nevertheless very true. If you want an "A" in any course, you need to work for it. No good instructor will just give you a good grade. Psychology is a remarkable field of study, but it is fairly challenging and it requires strong motivation and the determination to succeed.

If you have any questions about these study tips or about the Psychology courses offered at Columbia State, please feel free to contact me:



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