

The Time Management Secrets Of 29 Straight-A Students

By

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What does it take to maintain straight A's at MIT or Harvard?

What does it take to be a straight-A student in high school, while juggling varsity sports and numerous activities?



The students I interviewed gave a wide range of advice and I'm reminded in my own home that there is no one way to achieve productivity and success as a student. My two teenage daughters are both straight-A students, yet they have very different study habits. One listens to music while studying, the other doesn't. One checks social media as her "reward" for getting a piece of homework done, while the other leaves her phone in a different room to avoid the temptation. What was most unique in this group of high achievers was how often they talked about social media. Almost everyone mentioned the siren call of Snapchat, Instagram or Facebook, and many suggested specific apps as a way to manage those urges (e.g., Self Control, Stay Focused).

In addition to the familiar advice about using a calendar and being clear on priorities, straight-A students also know how to say no. From having no social life, or limiting friends to study groups, these suggestions—while seemingly extreme—might be the price to pay for excelling at the highest levels in academics. The full advice from the students I interviewed appears below.

ELIZABETH POBLETE attends Xavier College Preparatory in Phoenix, AZ. She will be attending the University of Arkansas as an Honors Fellow in the School of Engineering. Her advice:

"The basic principle of time management is as follows: do one thing, and one thing only until it is finished, then move on. This means, put your phone away so texting, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram aren't distracting you while doing homework and therefore adding to the time spent doing homework.

The most important guideline to time management, especially with homework, is a simple question: "What do I need to complete tonight so when I get to class tomorrow, I'm not kicking myself for not completing an assignment?"

CAITLIN HALE with a perfect 4.0 grade-point average and is now in her third year of medical school at Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine. Her advice:

"Staying focused on schoolwork can be a pretty daunting task, especially with all of the social media apps pinging in the background. I use an app called Self Control, which lets me set the amount of time and specifically which apps I want to avoid—including Facebook and Instagram."

ERIK FOGG is an MIT graduate who earned in only four years a Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, and 2 minors.

"Give yourself play rewards. Time management is mostly about staying focused—when we're playing a game we like, we're not tempted to be distracted. Knowing that we have a reward coming up, like video games, a show, or social time, is not only motivating, but it gives us a clear light at the end of the tunnel that keeps us from the malaise of feeling like we're trapped in work."

AMANDA KRUSE attends Council Rock High School South in Holland, Pennsylvania. Her advice:

"I make my own day-by-day calendar in a notebook and write down when everything is due. I made my own system...I circle any tests I have the next day, so I'll know to study for them the night before, I put an X over anything I don't have to worry about but I was just writing it down as a reminder, I highlight the things I already did, and I box things that aren't homework but that I need to remember later, like bringing money in for a special event."

When it comes to social media, I give myself goals, like if I do a certain number of math problems, I'll allow myself five minutes of Instagram. So it's an easy and nice break."

ALEXANDRA LADOVE is a straight A student at the Grauer School in Encinitas, California. She is also one of the nation's leading junior equestrians competing in the national equitation medal finals. In the fall, Alexandra will attend Auburn. Her advice:

"I set long and short term goals, and I make sure that I have enough time to realize these. For me, I had to give up going out at night. I spend my time studying, riding, training and competing. I love it; it's what I want to do. That isn't to say that it is always fun, or that I don't sometimes wish I could put it on the back burner and just go out with friends.

I recommend making sure to plan your day ahead of time, think about what needs to get done, and then do it. Leave plenty of time before you go to bed to make sure you accomplish what you need. One strategy that really helps is having a set time to start doing your schoolwork and to set an alarm to make sure you actually start then. Staying in a routine and trying to stick to a consistent schedule are key."

NIHAR SUTHAR is currently an undergraduate student at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Nihar's advice:

"Prioritize! I learned is that whenever I have a small task that needs to be completed (that takes less than 5 minutes), I should complete it now, rather than putting it off. This ensures that I do not have a long list of tasks that I have to complete later at the end of the day."

NATALIE KRUSE attends Council Rock High School South in Holland, Pennsylvania. Her advice:

"I have a homework log, which is a daily calendar, and for each class I write down when the homework is due. Even if it's due at the end of the week, I'll still write it down so if I have extra time at night I can start early. When it comes to reducing distractions, I don't listen to music or watch television while I'm doing my homework. I find that this helps me push through my homework at a much quicker pace. For social media, I'll spend time on my phone when I first get home, but then I'll put it down and won't pick it up until my homework is done, or I'll pick it up between subjects as a little reward—but I don't give myself more than a ten minute break, because it will feel like you have a lot more homework than you do if you take multiple breaks."

HALEY SILVA is a senior at Sierra High School in Manteca, CA. She recently received a scholarship to the University of the Pacific in Stockton. Her advice:

"Saying no to friends: Think of the consequences and what the best decision is for you; don't try to please others, think of yourself first. Be careful of who you surround yourself with; if they're your friend, no will not be an issue, and neither will negative peer pressure."

JOSHUA EICKMEIER is an online hybrid MBA student at Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School of Business. His advice:

"You need to be a realist: it's not possible to give 100% effort on every assignment, exceed expectations at work, spend time with family, and keep up with Game of Thrones. If you try, you'll just stress yourself out.

You need to set your priorities early on and stick to them. Don't waste time feeling guilty about your choices – think of them as effective compromises that will lead to your long-term success.

I also suggest structuring your schedule to avoid these conflicts whenever possible. For example, doing schoolwork in the morning is a great way to keep evenings free for time with family or coworkers, and making weekend plans in advance keeps you motivated to get work done during the week."

We're all stuck to our phones 24/7, so visit your app store and try out different time-management and study/homework apps to see which works best for you. I stuck with MyHomework app for some time, but found that placing everything on a large visual calendar worked best for me.

Saying 'no' to your friends is actually very simple in practice. Just say, 'No, I have an assignment to get done.' But do set aside some time to hang out with your friends and do something fun or relaxing. It could be as simple as having lunch or going to the movies. You still need a work/play balance in your life"

VICTORIA SHOCKLEY was a straight-A, honors student at Wakefield High School and recently graduated summa cum laude from NC State University in only three years. Her advice:

“Combine multiple tasks together. Sometimes, there literally aren’t enough hours in the day to do everything. Find an opportunity to combine several things at once – maybe you do homework or study while on the bus, or you listen to an audiobook for class while cleaning your room. You have to do all four things eventually, but this way you can maximize time that you might otherwise have spent being idle (such as a bus ride). That way, you cross two things off the list at once!

Learn to say no. I know it can be hard to turn down social events or extracurriculars, but it’s important to know your limits so you don’t overload yourself. If you know you have a busy weekend with friends coming up, try to limit your social calendar during the week so you can get the next week’s homework/reading done early (if it’s available in advance). While it may be disappointing to stay in on the weeknights, you’ll have a stress-free, school-free weekend to look forward to. If you’re working while in school, see if you can take on fewer hours during busy weeks, like midterms and finals.

Stay organized!! I can’t emphasize enough how staying organized helps people manage their time. Limit your time on social media until AFTER your work is finished. This is a big one – it’s so easy to get distracted scrolling through our Facebook newsfeeds or checking out photos on Instagram. We can start chatting with a friend or surfing through Twitter and before we know it, half the night is gone. Not only that, but if you’re trying to write a paper and stopping every five minutes to check a notification, that paper is going to take so much longer to write...and the longer it takes and the later it gets, the more sleepy you become. In between classes or lunch time are great opportunities to check your profiles, but otherwise wait to log in until after your homework/studying and other responsibilities are complete!”

AKRAM ALASHARI, MD was the top student in medical school. His advice:

“There is an extraordinary amount of idle time in our lives. Instead of letting that time pass underutilized, it is best to maximize productivity by taking advantage of it. This includes ANY waiting time. For example, waiting for the bus, in the airport, in between classes, etc. Use that time to complete short tasks that would otherwise accumulate and become a larger burden, such as responding to emails or studying.”

KESHAWN BOSTIC is a sophomore at Northfield Mount Hermon. He is also a student at Breakthrough New York, a nonprofit organization that transforms the lives of motivated, low-income students by preparing them for college so that they can succeed in the world. Keshawn’s advice:

“Time management is a big part of being a good student, and to put it bluntly, it is not easy. It is all about motivation and self-discipline. Sometimes, you just need to tell yourself that work is more important than a social life. The best way to do that is to make time work for you.

Learn how you work, what time you work best, and where you work best; whether you work best right after school or at midnight, do what you need to do to do the best work. There will be times when you will have to ignore friends or that special girl/guy you’ve been Snapchatting everyday—this is just the reality of life as a student. But by having that initial work time alone, you can then make the most of your time elsewhere.”

JOHN PAUL ENGEL graduated from the University of Iowa and was named a Collegiate Scholar. He earned an MBA from the University of Chicago. Today he is Executive Director, Project Be the Change (www.projectbethechange.com). His advice:

“Convince yourself whatever you are studying is fun and will be important to you in life. IF you think it’s hard then it will be hard. If you make a game of it creating songs and little games with flash cards then you are more likely to remember it.

When you study you need to study. No cell phone, Facebook, etc. You need to unplug and focus. Go someplace to study or study at the kitchen table. If you study in your room you will sleep or get interrupted by your friends.

Study on Friday nights. Seriously if you want to be more than average you have to do what the average won’t do. Most students start the weekend on Thursday night. If you work through Friday then you can be sure to get your work done. If not, then you still have two days before the work is due.

Surround yourself by the 5 smartest people you can find. They will challenge you to be better. My friends and I used to compete on who could earn the highest score on a test. Make it a game with bragging rights.”

KRISTIN GMUNDER is a senior at Villa Walsh Academy in Morristown, New Jersey. Her advice:

“Every high school and college student loves to watch TV; we're not fooling anyone. However, we all know we don't have time to watch TV every night of the week as we would like to. As students, we know that each week the workload is different in weight—some weeks we have very little work and other weeks we have so much that we are drowning. The way to combat this issue of our TV addictions is to binge watch. Yes, many people would look at me weirdly for suggesting that students binge watch using programs like Netflix or Hulu, but this really is the best way for us to enjoy TV when those workloads are less and we have more free time. This way when we're suffering under those textbooks and the papers we have to write, we're not tempted to type netflix.com into the Google search bar.”

MARIAM OLADIPO is ranked number one in her senior class at Milton Hershey School, in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Her advice:

“During the day, I try to get as much homework done as possible so that I'm not as swamped at night. It seems to work because I get a good seven to eight hours of sleep every night. For me, it's more balancing friends with activities. With school, I can just plan a study session where we can get work done and hang out. Activities present a different problem. Many times I have to schedule time just to hang out with my friends. It's not spontaneous, but it is still fun. A lot of my friends have social media but I prefer not to because I know that it can take up a lot of time. I prefer to text, call, or talk to people in person. I would say pick the things to get involved with that you truly love. You don't have to be involved in a lot of different things because you won't be able to manage it all with your friends, your grades, and your health. Make sure that you take time for yourself so that you can be the best person that you can be.”

JANE NINIVAGGI is a senior at University Liggett School and plans to attend Barnard College. Her advice:

“There is nothing wrong with social media, but it can take over a student's life if they are not able to disconnect from it. During exam weeks, I delete Twitter and Instagram off my phone. I also make sure to leave my phone at home when there is something that I know I need to put all of my focus into. A key part of staying focused is keeping your standards high. At Liggett, I play several sports and am on the Student Commission, so that helps to give us an inherent sense of time management. You quickly learn that your time is so invaluable and you want to spend it in the most productive way. I also find ways on the weekend to combine my social and academic life — I hang out with friends who have similar standards and we do things together on the weekends such as studying for exams.”

JACQUELINE KOPICKI is a senior at University Liggett School and plans to attend Miami University in Ohio. Her advice:

“I put everything in my calendar on my phone, and I color code my activities and appointments. For example, I will code athletics one color, the school musical practices another color and my assignments another color. I think setting your own priorities and figuring out what is most important helps you manage your time and stay focused. For me, school comes first, so I make it a priority to finish my homework and talk to my teachers about all of my school-related issues before anything else. At the school, the most important thing is to have a close relationship with your teachers and other students who are focused. This helps you gain the mindset to work on your schoolwork first before you tackle anything else.”

GRACE LEBRON attends Eastlake High School. Her advice:

“I think about my future constantly and it's what keeps me in line. I know I want to lead a happy, successful life and that getting my work done and being the best I can be in my educational environment is a step in the right direction. You really need to prioritize and consider everything that's going on. If you know you have tests coming up you're not prepared for or have unfinished assignments due the next day, going to the movies shouldn't be at the top of your list. Personally I set mini goals and checking social media is kind of like I'm rewarding myself. For example I'd tell myself that when I finish two assignments I can check one social media. It's worked out pretty well for me. Family is also very important so I always make time to be with them and help around the house.”

We teenagers do need some downtime though so no matter what, ALWAYS carve out time to enjoy a hobby or just relax. It'll keep you from going crazy."

ALI WARSHAY is a senior at Westwood High School and is entering Harvard College. Ali's advice:

"A piece of advice I would give to help manage time is that before anything else, know your organizational strengths and weaknesses as well as how much you can realistically complete *well* in a given day. I become distracted easily if I don't set a detailed schedule for myself; however, once I've allocated a specific amount of time for everything on my to-do list, tasks become much more manageable. I religiously use the Schedule Planner app, which syncs with my calendar and helps me visually manage my time.

I'm also a big fan of the Stay Focused app on my computer, which blocks the amount of time I can spend each day on specific websites (especially social media)."

MORGAN MUNSEY is a senior at Sullivan East High School and will attend East Tennessee State University. Morgan's advice:

"I use a planner with a month view and a weekly view. I put all club meetings, planned time with friends and family, sport activities, and big tests on the month view. Daily items I need to accomplish such as homework and reading I keep in the weekly view sections. Each night I spend 5-10 minutes focusing on what I accomplished, what I need to better, and what is to come the next day. This helps keep me prepared and less forgetful.

I am a procrastinator. I always have been, and I always will be. It's so easy to say, I can do it later, and then forget to do it. So rather than making later the next day or in a few hours I use the timer function on my phone. If the time is 11:13 and I need to study but want to put it off, I give myself 17 minutes. Although it doesn't seem like much time, this routine satisfies my procrastinator personality."

NATHAN REYNOLDS attends Reynoldsburg High School. His advice:

"Do your school work in school, when you have free time. It greatly helps at home when you have a lot of other work to do. If you can't do it in school, divvy up your work and time so that you have a schedule that reads like, 8-8:30 Math, and so on. It makes you feel the need to get the work done within your time limit, and makes for free time in your day."

KRYSTIE SEESE is a graduate student at Post University. Her advice:

"I have found that I work best when I use a planner to track the assignments I've completed and denote the assignments I still owe. This process has yet to fail me. At the beginning of each week I plan what I will complete each day specifically. This helps alleviate the overwhelming feeling of seeing 10-12 assignments that need to be done. As I complete them, I check them off. Simple as that! In addition, this system has helped me ensure that all work due each week is completed on time.

On that same note, it is best to plan to complete assignments when you know you have time. For example, I set aside every Sunday for my school work. I get as much done as I can on Sundays, and spread out completing unfinished assignments throughout the remainder of the week. This takes the stress off of coming home from a long day at work and still having a ton of schoolwork to do. I've found the key to success in an online program is to plan ahead and have the discipline to follow through."

Kevin is the author of *15 Secrets Successful People Know About Time Management: The Productivity Habits of 7 Billionaires, 13 Olympic Athletes, 29 Straight-A Students and 239 Entrepreneurs.*