

Habits of Successful Students

Elon Kline

ENTR253/LEAD253

University of Delaware

*“SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE AREN’T BORN THAT WAY.
THEY BECOME SUCCESSFUL BY ESTABLISHING THE
HABIT OF DOING THINGS UNSUCCESSFUL PEOPLE
DON’T LIKE TO DO.”
—WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY*

Finals roll around, and it can go one of two ways...

1. They go smoothly
2. You end up pulling your hair out

These two scenarios have distinct reasoning for the outcomes. Either you have already studied throughout the semester and know the material, or you have not studied and have to cram it all in the night before. Both scenarios stem from the habits you took throughout the semester. Obviously, anyone would look at this and say, “Duh! Either they studied, or they didn’t.” However, crammed within your daily life, approximately 40% of your behaviors are habits (Neal, Wood, & Quinn 2006). The successful student has successful habits, and the unsuccessful student has habits which set them for failure.

Some habits include...

- Waking up at 8 am and hitting the snooze 3 times before you wake up
- Watching TV as a way to decompress
- Going to the gym or going on a run at 3 every day
- Going to class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 12:30 pm

What is a habit?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a habit is “a settled tendency or usual manner of behavior.” So, every repeated task, behavior, and tendency are habits. Most people wouldn’t think of hitting a light switch every time they walk into a room as a habit. Of course, they need to see, so they turn on the light. But, think about when they leave the room. They don’t have to turn off the light, yet some people tend to turn off the light, and there are people who tend to leave it on. Turning the light on and turning the light off is a “settled tendency or usual manner of behavior.”

So, let’s go back to the finals scenarios and compare the habits of a successful student with the habits of an unsuccessful student.

| Successful Student | Unsuccessful Student |
|------------------------------|--|
| Goes to class | Skips class regularly |
| Reads textbook | Relies on the lecture |
| Asks for help | Works alone |
| Gets work done ahead of time | Waits until the last minute to do work |
| Limits distractions | Studies with phone next to them |
| Goes to the library | Studies in a social environment |
| Eats well | Eats Chick-fil-A on the regular |
| Takes notes in class | Relies on their memory |

Of course, we can’t ignore the rest of college life, consisting of much more than academics. College students have a wide range of activities, such as attending classes, studying, making time for a social life, participating in clubs, eating, sleeping (or the lack of it), doing chores, relaxing, exercising (or the lack of it), escapading those weekend events 😊, meetings, participating in campus involvement, working, interning and anything revolving around leadership roles. By all accounts, a student lives a busy life.

Often, students work hard in one area and lack in all others. They might be the most studious person around, yet they have little social life. On the flip side, they might go hard every night with their social life, yet their GPA drops every semester. Some people immerse themselves in leadership roles and responsibilities but fall off the wall when it comes to free time.

The book, *Habitudes* by Tim Elmore, illustrates a metaphor for the necessity of habits for leaders. Imagine if you will, a bakery. By all metrics, this is a thriving bakery. Customers flock in and out of doors from opening to closing. The bakery grew to popularity because of the expert skills of the owner. He works tirelessly to create the most pristine baked goods around, and he delivers on that pursuit. From day to night, he preps, bakes, sells, talks to customers, fulfills orders, closes for the day, cleans, and keeps the books (Elmore 2012). Knowing how many tasks lye on his plate, do you think he can maintain that work for long?

Of course, he can’t maintain it. There is one vital thing about the baker; he is starving. Really! He is a starving baker. He has no time to eat in the morning, he can’t eat on the job, and when he comes home, he desperately needs to sleep. He bakes food for a living yet forgets and neglects to feed himself.

Eventually, his thriving bakery slows down. It didn’t slow down because there was no demand for baked goods, and it didn’t slow down because the bakery received a newspaper review that said, “I’d rather eat dirt.” Customers stopped showing up because the quality of the pastries went down, the time to receive an order slowed down, and the energy the baker once had slowly dwindled. The baker was burnt out. He could not serve his customers because he forgot and neglected to serve himself.

As a student and a leader, do you stack task after task, event after event, class after class, and responsibility after responsibility? Is it likely you are running close to a burnout or are even burnt out at the moment? It might be hard to stay on top of your responsibilities and activities. Like the baker, you need to take care of yourself to keep up with your schedule.

As a student and as a leader, you are equipping yourself with behaviors that give you time, energy, and productivity. They will ease your day to day tasks. Managing and avoiding burnout is precisely why habits have so much value. Building the right habits keep you from running into the ground. Habits give people energy to keep up with consistent activity. Habits optimize productivity to give back the time you have lost or will lose based on your time-wasting behaviors, such as procrastinating, phone usage, sleeping in, and even lacking of focus. The day of busy college students becomes easy because of the purposeful, productive behaviors of habits.

*IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO CHANGE A
HABIT, BUT IT'S HARD. REALLY HARD"
- PETER BREGMAN*

Shortly, you will learn how to create hundreds of habits that will simplify your life. Before this happens, you must commit. Habits are not developed the first time they are attempted. They are started, cultivated over time, and eventually become a natural tendency. Once they begin to form, the habit will be preformed effortlessly. It requires discipline.

Can you commit to the consistent effort, in the pursuit of creating ease and endless possibilities? Be honest. If the answer is yes, the future awaits. If you can't commit, do yourself a favor. Stop reading, open a bakery, work 24/7/365, make a disgusting amount of money, buy a Ferrari, buy a lion-like Mike Tyson, overwork yourself, file bankruptcy, and come back to this same spot.

Reflection Question

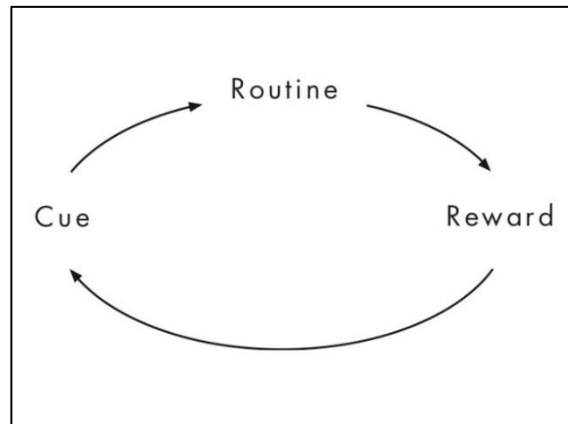
**Do you to forget
and neglect
yourself? Why?**

----- Here is a place holder for 10 years from now, so you can pick up reading where you left off. -----

The Simple Psychology of a Habit (now with illustrations)

MIT researchers broke down the human psychological reasoning behind all habits (1999).

They made it three easy to understand steps revolving in a process of a cue, a routine, and a reward. The habit loop gives rationale to why people perform their habits and an insight into how to create new ones.



Apply the loop to a common harmful habit. Using this process, you can analyze current behaviors, find the reason that it is performed, and replace it with a different, more positive habit. The following scenario and process were inspired by *The Power of Habit* written by Charles Duhigg. The scenario has been adapted to mimic a typical college habit.

Take into consideration a habit that negatively affects someone’s concentration. Amy, the hypothetical student, has a phone problem. While the professor recites their lecture, Amy repeatedly fidgets and gets distracted. The primary distraction, like many students, is her phone. When Amy gets to class, she checks her phone immediately, and to prevent herself from using the phone again, she puts it in her pocket. Like any other day, she listens and writes notes from the lecture, eventually grabbing the phone out of instinct.

What is the cue? What is the routine? What is the reward?

Step 1 - Identify the routine

The easiest one to identify is always the routine. The routine always is the observable behavior, aka the habit. In this case, grabbing her phone is the observable behavior.

- Cue
- **Routine – Grabbing the phone**
- Reward

Step 2 - Experiment with rewards

Next, Amy tries out new alternatives to grabbing her phone. When she gets the urge to take out her phone, she does something else, anything else. Every time she reaches for her phone, she tries something different. She wanted to grab her phone and instead left the classroom to use the bathroom. She felt the urge to reach for her phone and instead drew a picture on her notes.

She again felt the urge and instead took a drink from her water bottle. Amy is trying to discover a reward that satisfies her craving to reach for her phone. You might say the urge is unmistakable. It could be the urge to stay connected with her friends, maybe her FOMO is acting up, she might just need to fidget like usual.

Those are possible rewards, yet Amy won't know for sure unless she follows this process. After every new reward she experiments with, she will immediately jot down the first three things that come to mind. Duhigg says it could be "emotions, random thoughts, reflections on how you're feeling, or just the first three words that pop into your head" (Duhigg).

After you write down your thoughts, wait a couple of minutes. Duhigg recommends 15 minutes, but in this case, time is limited, so she waits 5 minutes (Duhigg).

If she still feels the urge to reach for her phone, she has to keep on digging for that reward. She would try new possible rewards. In her case, she didn't feel the urge to reach for her phone after she went to the bathroom. Through her "three thought notes," she hypothesized that the reward was a break from class. So, she tried again with a different reward that satisfied the same craving. She just walked a brief lap around the building. Still, she had no urge to reach for her phone.

Now she knows her presumption was right and she simply needed a break from focusing on the class lecture.

- Cue
- Routine – Grabbing the phone
- **Reward – Getting a mental break from class**

Step 3 – Isolate the Cue

Much like the reward, a cue isn't easy to identify. There are countless number of possible cues. One might seem obvious, but if you are wrong and stick with that assumption, this whole process is worthless. With the wrong cue, changing a habit is like riding a bicycle with no chain. When you identify the right cue, make sure to write your old habit a goodbye letter. You probably wont miss it though.

For your convenience, Duhigg has sieved through the world of science and has been able to give five categories of possible cues.

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Location | Where are you? |
| Time | What time is it? |
| Emotional State | What's your emotional state? |
| Other People | Who else is around? |
| Immediately Proceeding Action | What action preceded the urge? |

During every urge and every occurrence of the habit, answer those questions.

Amy began her class lecture (PSYC100, MWF 12:30, Smith 140). Unconsciously reached for her phone, checked it, put it in her pocket, and answered the questions. She was in Smith 140, it was 12:50, she felt confused, her friend was sitting to the left of her, and of course, she was listening to the lecture of her class. She again felt the urge to get her phone and immediately wrote the answers to the question. She was in the same place, it was 1:12, she felt bored, she was still sitting next to her friend, and still in the god-awful lecture. Next instance of the habit. She jotted down the same information, except she now felt tired, confused, bored and it was 1:30.

With a few renditions of this process over two days, Amy identified a cue. The next step was for her to look for patterns and look for differences. She needs to find any critical insight that presents itself consistently before or during the routine.

First of all, it's obvious she was in class (Smith 140), she sat next to her friend, and the lecture proceeded the routine every time. But Amy doesn't think much of this data, because she experiences the same circumstances in another class in another Smith lecture hall and she doesn't check her phone every day. You might look at her emotional state and say that's the cue. Obviously, she checked her phone when she was frustrated, bored, and/or tired, that's the reason she needs the reward in the first place. You are right, but that's not the whole picture.

The class started at 12:30, she picked up her phone at 12:50, then 1:12, and again at 1:30. On average, those times are about 20 minutes apart. From this data, Amy concludes she checks her phone about every 20 minutes. BINGO!

Finally, Amy has all the pieces of the puzzle and can move onto the final step, replacing the habit with a more productive one.

- **Cue – Checking her phone every 20 minutes**
- Routine – Grabbing the phone
- Reward – Getting a mental break from class

Not all habits will occur frequently. Some habits occur once a day and, in some cases, they might occur every Monday when you work on STAR campus for lab, or every time you walk into your front door.

If they are less frequent, be patient. You might have less opportunity to experiment with rewards and less opportunity to reflect on cues.

Habits require discipline. Once again...

"It doesn't take long to change a habit, but it's hard. Really hard" - Peter Bregman

Time to Change Your Life

Here lays the cream of the crop... the golden buzzer... the A+ on a paper... the mountain peak... the caffeine to a late night study... the friend with open seats in their car... the professor that rounds up your grade... the air conditioning to your dorm... the money to your empty bank account... **the creation of endless habits aka, the whole reason for the book.**

Look back at the opening paragraph to the entire book; **40% of our daily behaviors are habits.** No, seriously look at it. Now, look at the opening paragraph again; **successful students have successful habits, and unsuccessful students have damaging habits.**

Look at the successful and unsuccessful habit table instead. Students have 40% of their daily behaviors on autopilot. The table is set up to show the potential habit switches. One student could swap out eating Chick-fil-A every day with meal prepping or eating a salad. Now, that swap works both ways. Someone could accidentally change a good habit into a bad one. When the semester catches up, and people get stressed, they could potentially substitute a good habit with a bad one because it is easier, such as taking a long nap after a stressful day instead of maintaining the routine of going to the gym.

40% P.S. - If you can name all 40% of those habits, you get an automatic A for this class

That number doesn't just signify the students, it represents everybody in the world.

If 40% of your daily behaviors are habits, and those habits are what make success, there is a huge opportunity to tap into that resource and leverage it in your favor. You can't change all 40%, but you sure can change a good amount. Even changing one habit can have a meaningful impact on your life.

Here are 38 successful habits:

| | |
|--|--|
| Meditate | Call Mom |
| Call Dad | Don't procrastinate |
| Plan projects before I start | Take notes |
| Review notes rewrite notes | Go to class |
| Get to class on time | Ask questions during class |
| Rid all distractions while studying | Study in the library |
| Eat breakfast | Eat three meals |
| Drink 8 glasses of water | Eat vegetables |
| Workout | Go to sleep at the same time every night |
| Wake up at the same time every morning | Don't hit snooze |
| Morning routine | Nighttime routine |
| Run | Stretch |
| Save 10% of my paycheck | Apply for 2 scholarships a week |
| Limit social media to 45 min a day | Bathe |
| Brush teeth | Keep up hygiene |
| Floss | Reflect on goals |
| Read | Journal |
| Take 10 photos a day | Draw 1 picture a day |
| Write 750 words a day | Clean room |

You have either

Identified a habit you want to replace and identified a habit that satisfies the previous reward

or

You have skipped the first step and just identified a habit you want to create.

Step 4 – Have a plan

Creating a plan for habits is extremely easy. Fill out this prompt

| | | | | | | |
|--------|--------|----|------|----|----------|---|
| I will | | at | | in | | . |
| | Action | | Time | | Location | |

This sentence is called an implementation intention (Clear, 2018). Imagine Tim, who wants to start working out. He just left his MWF class, which let out at 11:50. Typically, the class lets out at 12:15. So, he used that free time to go to the Lil Bob. At the gym, Tim lifted some weights, ran on the treadmill, and left within 30 minutes.

Two days later, on Wednesday, Tim had an open block of time for 3 hours. After class, he went home and relaxed for a little bit. He relaxed so much that he blew off the gym and said he will do it tomorrow.

Tim could have benefited from an implementation intention. If he knew precisely what workout he was doing, what time and day he was doing it, and where he was doing it, he wouldn't have blown off the habit.

Get a specific action. What does workout mean? For Tim, that means lift weights for his upper body on Monday, lift for his lower body on Wednesday, and lift for full body on Friday. Each workout will also consist of a 15-minute cooldown on the treadmill. Without this much detail for the habit he will perform, he could easily go to the gym for 30 minutes, throw around any type of weight, and call that a success. If someone wants to drink water every day, they could easily drink one glass of water and call that a success. They could also say they will drink 8 glasses of water, and that would be their target. Specifically identifying the action give Tim a metric to see if his habit execution was successful.

Set a time. When will you do it? Tim didn't have time for the second day. He thought he would go after he relaxed, but since there was no set time he had to be at the gym, he continuously put it off until his 3 hours were up. If he said, "I will go to the gym every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday after class at 12:15," he would have gone to the gym on the second day. It wouldn't have been time for Tim to relax, because it would have been time to work out. No excuses, he would know precisely what to do.

Set a Location. Where will you be doing it? In Tim's case, he wants to work out at the Lil Bob. But, say he wanted to create a study routine. Maybe because he wanted to make sure he stayed on top of his work, so he didn't have to cram it all in during the last minute. He could study anywhere, but is that a good idea? Studying in his living room, in Trabant, at a Café, or in the Library are very different. If you could choose the best study area, where would it be? The answer to the question is the answer to the implementation intention. So, if Tim chose Trabant, he can't go home and study, he would probably get distracted by his roommate yelling at the TV. To maximize productivity, he commits to Trabant, and every single time, he are goes to Trabant.

Tim's implementation intention goes as such... "I will lift weights for my upper body on Monday, lower body on Wednesday, full body on Friday, and end each workout with a 15 min cooldown on the treadmill at 12:15 after my class on the designated days in the Lil Bob."

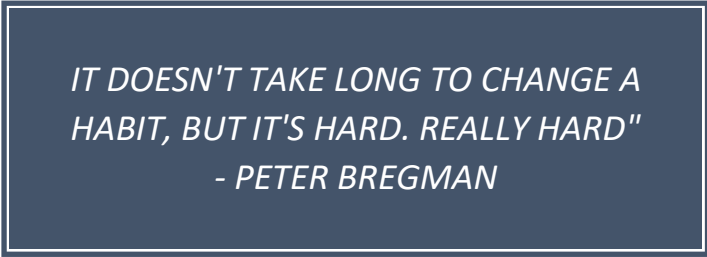
If you understand your implementation intention, doing the work comes easy. Some days you might not feel like it, and some days you might say, "I can skip today. What's the harm?" No excuses! You know what you are doing when you are doing it, and where you are doing it.

It is now time to go do it.

Do you have your implementation intention set? Make the plan and write it down. Actually write it down.

Now, go forth and create those habits.

You've Got This



*IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG TO CHANGE A
HABIT, BUT IT'S HARD. REALLY HARD"
- PETER BREGMAN*

This book has all the tools needed to equip anyone with the right habits of a successful student. Following the process, step by step, someone could create an arsenal of behaviors to propel them with ease. Remember, the purpose of cultivating positive habits is to create seamless ease with day to day activities. Minimizing stress, fatigue, and wasted time are all necessities for leaders.

Be Patient. Habits take time to cultivate. Make sure to completely understand the habit loop. The process of habit formation is so much easier when the cue, routine, and reward are identified. **Work hard.** Once you have that information down, implement the plan. You didn't go through all of the steps to only kind of implement it. **Don't Give Up.** There will be days and moments you don't want to take action. Stay committed and power through those roadblocks. **If You Fall, Don't Give Up.** There will also be days those roadblocks will be too much to handle. Just because you missed one day, doesn't mean you can't pick up right where you left off. **Pick Up Right Now.** If you haven't started yet, what are you waiting for? Pick up a habit and take action.

References

Clear, James. *Atomic Habits: Tiny Changes, Remarkable Results: an Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. Avery, an Imprint of Penguin Random House, 2018.

Duhigg, Charles. "How Habits Work." *Charles Duhigg*, charlesduhigg.com/how-habits-work/.

Elmore, Tim. *Habitudes: Images That Form Leadership Habits & Attitudes*. Growing Leaders, 2012.

"Habit." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/habit.

"MIT Researcher Sheds Light on Why Habits Are Hard to Make and Break." *MIT News*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 20 Oct. 1999, news.mit.edu/1999/habits.

Neal, David T, et al. "Habits—A Repeat Performance." *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2006, pp. 198–202.