Have you been disappointed with your grades of late?

Even the brightest students can sometimes find themselves academically underperforming, often through no fault of their own. When students find themselves in this situation, it’s often because they’re stuck in a rut and are not sure what to do to improve. If this sounds like you, the first step is to work out the reasons why you may be underperforming, and the next step is to work out how to tackle the problem. If you’re not sure how to go about it, this article shows you what you can do to form an improvement plan to help you achieve the grades you know you’re capable of achieving.

1. Adopt a positive mental attitude

In the face of lower-than-expected grades, it’s only human to react by feeling disappointed with oneself. When you’re frequently receiving lower grades than you’d hoped for, you may start to feel depressed or defeated, and feel like giving up. The first step on the road to improving your grades is to turn this negativity on its head. You need to be positive about the situation if you’re to stand a chance of improving it. Acknowledge that your grades aren’t what you’re aiming for, but believe that you can do something about it. Start by mentally taking control of the situation: instead of thinking “I’m a failure”, think “I can and will do better than this.” Don’t give up – take
Do you do well at the theoretical side of Maths, but struggle with applying it to practical situations?

2. Work out where you’re falling short

You need to work out which areas need targeting before you can draw up a plan of action, so the next step is to figure out the areas in which you’re underperforming, and why. Are your grades consistently lower than you’d like them to be across all your subjects, or is there one particular area you’re struggling with that’s bringing down your overall performance in a particular subject? Take a look at your grades over the last few months and look for patterns. Has there been a general decline in academic achievement, or have your grades in certain areas always been lower than you’d hoped? Are your grades always low in the same areas, such as one problem subject? You’ll probably already have a vague idea of the answers to these questions, but seeing your grades written down on paper – perhaps even in graph format – can help you see things more clearly.

Next, think about the reasons why you’re not performing to your full academic potential in the areas you’ve identified. Are there external factors that may be negatively affecting your grades, such as a family problem or worrying about a social situation at school? Are you struggling with any particular academic skills that might be dragging you down, such as essay-writing or note-taking? And are you studying in a way that works for you? These are all factors that could be affecting your academic performance, so once you’ve isolated what the problem is – it could be a combination of more than one of these issues – you’ll be able to start tackling it. If the problems are external, you’ll need to take steps towards getting them to a point at which they no longer adversely affect your studies; seeing a counsellor might help, for instance. If they’re academic, read the rest of this article for some suggestions on how you can improve.

3. Talk to your teachers

Your teachers know you best, so it’s worth talking to them when you’re drawing up a plan of action for improving your grades. Ask them where they think you need to improve, and they’ll probably have some advice on how you can go about it. Coupled with the advice in the rest of this article, this should allow you to tailor an action plan to your personal situation.

4. Pay more attention in class – and ask questions

If you’re prone to daydreaming in class, it’s time to start focusing on the here and now. Listen to what the teacher is saying rather than talking with friends or allowing your mind to wander. Don’t simply copy down what’s on the board without thinking about it; make
If you struggle with understanding something, make sure to ask.

Make sure your notes are legible and well-organised.

If you've understood it, make neat notes so that you can understand them when you come back to them (more on that later), and don’t be afraid to speak up if there’s something you don’t understand or want clarifying. It’s much easier to ask a teacher to explain something differently than it is to trawl through books trying to find a clearer explanation for yourself, and they won’t think less of you for asking.

5. Start organising your life

Clutter of any kind inhibits our ability to operate efficiently, so another way of improving your academic performance is to get organised. Keep your workspace tidy and all your notes and textbooks organised in such a way that you know where everything is. Start thinking more about your time management, too, as this will allow you to prioritise your time effectively, freeing time for problem subjects. Write yourself a daily timetable that incorporates your school schedule, dividing your day into slots of time and fitting in plenty of time for studying. Allocate extra time to subjects or topics you’ve identified as being ones you’re struggling with; it could be that the reason for your underperformance in these subjects is that you’re simply not devoting enough time to them.

6. Improve your note-taking skills

One of the reasons you may have identified for underperforming is that you’re not taking good enough notes. Hurriedly scrawled notes from class can be difficult to make sense of when you come to revise from them, or even to write an essay based on them. It’s all too easy to misunderstand your own notes and fail to get a strong enough grasp of the topic. It’s imperative, therefore, that you produce good notes from each of your classes and from the books you use – notes that you can read, that are useful, and that are logically organised. If you make notes by hand – in class, for example – try to type them up at the end of the day, while they’re still fresh in your mind. Click here for lots more tips on effective note-taking.

7. Improve your essay-writing skills

Another common reason for academic underperformance is that the student’s essay-writing skills aren’t sufficient for the level required to achieve top grades. This is fairly easily fixed by improving your essay-writing technique. Good essay technique covers all aspects of essay-writing, from the research phase to the final proofread, and even how you respond to the feedback you get for your essays. Responding in the right way to feedback – and not taking criticism personally – will be particularly useful if you feel you’re underperforming, as this should give you the guidance you need to be able to improve. We have lots more
advice in previous articles on how to write brilliant essays, so follow the links below if you think that your essay-writing is what’s bringing down your grades.

How to improve your essay-writing quickly
How to write essays that answer the question
How to write better essays: 6 practical tips
How to do research for an excellent essay
How to write dazzlingly brilliant essays
10 types of essay feedback and how to respond to them
13 essential editing tips to use in your essay-writing

8. Find the right learning style for you

If you’re academically underperforming, another possible reason could be that you haven’t found the right learning style for you. We’re all different, and each of us has our own way of studying that yields the best results. Perhaps you just haven’t found your most effective studying style yet. If you’ve been trying to work on your own, for example, you might find it easier to work with a friend or two, so that you have someone else there to motivate you. To help work out the best learning style for you, have a read of our article on how to find the learning style that suits you best.

9. Improve your memory

Many students struggle to remember all the information they need for exams, and this brings their grades down. With so much to learn across many subjects, remembering facts, figures and arguments is a pretty monumental task, and you need to arm yourself with some effective memory aids to help you. You’ll find more tips on improving your memory in our article on memory techniques for exam preparation.

10. Stop procrastinating

One of the reasons why you’re underperforming could be that you’re spending too much time procrastinating – that is, putting off work by distracting yourself with other things, such as social media. This is a common response to a big workload; when you have so much to do that you don’t know where to start, the temptation is simply not to start. The problem is that in doing so, you’re delaying the inevitable, as well as making your task worse by eating into the time when you could be productive. If you’re guilty of procrastination – and we all are at some point or another – take a look at our article on five reasons we...
procrastinate and how to stop it.

11. Allow plenty of time for revision

If you’re achieving lower scores than you’d hoped for on timed tests or mock exams, it could be because you’re not allowing enough time for revising for them. This may be because you know it’s not ‘the real thing’, but practice exams are just as important as real ones. They show you which areas you need to spend more time on, and achieving good grades in them will give you a confidence boost. Treat them as seriously as you would a real exam, allowing yourself plenty of time to revising for them. Better still, revise everything you learn as you go along, so that you learn it properly first time round and have less need for revision. Also, be sure to read our articles on effective revision techniques for science students and humanities students.

12. Make learning more fun

Sometimes students underperform because they have simply lost the motivation to learn. It’s not surprising, when the pressure of exams and doing well at school takes away the enjoyment of learning. It’s easy to get so focused on achieving top grades that you forget that learning can actually be fun – and not only that, but it’s much easier to do well when you’re enjoying it. If studying has become a chore for you, it’s time to put the fun back into learning. You could do this by gamifying your studies, or by trying some of the ideas in our article on 15 ways to make studying less stressful.

13. Hire a private tutor

As a last resort, if the ideas in this article haven’t worked for you, you might consider hiring a private tutor to help you improve your grades for a particularly tricky subject. Some extra tuition may be just what you need to help bring your grade up, as you’ll benefit from one-to-one tuition in an environment in which you might feel more able to ask questions without the fear of speaking up in front of your peers. If you think this would help you, speak to your parents and suggest that they place an advert in the local paper if they’re willing to cover the cost of private tuition for you.

14. Go on a summer school

A final option – best taken alongside the other advice in this article, rather than instead of it – is to book
A summer school might give you the academic boost you need – and you can have fun at the same time.

yourself onto an academic summer school. Taking part in a summer school would allow you to learn away from the pressures of the classroom and exams, reinvigorating your love of learning and inspiring you to take a more determined approach to your studies. What’s more, summer schools are great for helping you get to grips with trickier subjects, so this could be a good solution to your underperforming subjects as well. Take a look at our summer school courses to find one to help you start improving your grades. It’s not just an option in the summer – ever-popular Easter revision courses are a great way to get a boost shortly before your exams.

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