Be a Real Survivor

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Take the challenge, and you'll reap the rewards. Here's how.

"Reality TV" may be entertaining, but actually how real is it? If you are like the majority of teens, your life is so hectic that you may wish you were stranded on a desert island, teamed with your fellow island dwellers while you strive to outlast them.

On the show Survivor, the challenge is to "Outwit, Outplay, Outlast." In school, the requirements aren't much different: Use wit to succeed in class and manage to enjoy life while juggling all your roles (student, friend, family member, employee, etc.), and the lasting rewards will outweigh even a hefty reality TV show prize.

The major survival skills you need right now are academic and coping skills. On the academic side, the name of the game is grades, and study and test-taking skills are along the path to take. For coping or stress-management skills, the keys are setting priorities and realistic goals and finding ways to relax.

As you deal with the tough parts of school, you may find yourself longing for graduation. Fortunately, the skills that help you survive school are the same ones you will need throughout your work life.

Read on for a crash course in survival skills.

Outwit: Study Tips

1. Plan your time and get organized. Use a daily planner to record test dates, paper due dates, times you plan to study, and anything else that is important in your life. Schedule more time for classes that you find difficult, those that have a lot of assignments, and those with a demanding teacher.

Keep your homework space organized, too. Would you be able to find a quiet, uncluttered place to study right now? Or would you have to spend 15 minutes clearing off your desk? Make room to store school supplies and old tests and notes you don't need at the moment.

Planning and organizing are essential on the job too. If your boss asks you for the sales report for last December, you'll know where you filed it. If you are handed an unexpected rush job, you should be able to adjust your schedule to fit it in.
**Survivor tips:**

"I achieve good grades in school because I write down all of my assignments in an agenda," says Chrissy, 14, who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "When I am ready to go home, I look in my agenda to make sure I have all of the books that I need."

Kody, 17, from Sandy, Utah, suggests, "Get a separate folder for each class and keep it organized." That way, you won't waste your study time searching for materials from a certain class.

**2. Keep on top of your assignments.**

If you do, you won't be learning the material for the first time when you start studying for a test. Dr. Carolyn Hopper, a professor at Middle Tennessee State University and the author of Practicing College Study Skills, suggests that students "prepare for each class as if there will be a pop quiz." Keep up with the reading and get an early start on your projects. Being prepared each day will help you get the most out of each class period. And you will avoid the panic of having too much to do in too little time at the end of the term.

What should you do when your teacher doesn't check homework? It's easy to skip it when time is tight, but consider sharing your efforts instead. Compare answers with your classmates. If you don't agree on an answer, ask the teacher to go over it.

**3. Learn to take good notes.**

Taking good notes during class is essential. Write down as much as you can, paying attention to clues about what's important. For example, teachers often write main ideas down on the board, start off a statement by saying it's important, or speak more slowly when giving facts you'll need to know. Dr. Hopper points out that you can take notes faster if you don't use complete sentences and if you abbreviate wherever possible. You might even try inventing your own abbreviations for words you use often. Also, look over your notes after class to see if you have any questions and to mark the important parts.

When taking notes at home, try to identify the main idea of each chapter, and then check to see what your teacher emphasized in class. Try to concentrate on those parts. Never copy full sentences from the book--always summarize in your own words.

In the workplace, you may need to take notes or summarize important information. If you have to learn to use a new computer program to access your work files, you will know what steps to take if you made a note. If your supervisor asks you to summarize the important points of a report for your co-workers, you will know how to do it effectively.
Survivor tips:

Katherine, 15, from Shirley, New York, suggests, "Get a recorder and bring it to school and record the teacher.... If there is something important that you need to study for, you have it in the palm of your hand."

Jenn, 17, of New York City, offers these tips on taking notes from a textbook: "I color-code them and make sure that every fact that could possibly be on the test is in my notes."

4. Stay focused and on task.

Getting down to business for studying is no easy job. Suddenly, everything from cleaning your room to giving the dog a bath can seem like more fun.

Make sure your family and friends know that you plan to study and don't want to be interrupted. Then remind yourself that the sooner you begin, the sooner you'll be done. Bob Wilson, a staff counselor at George Washington University, says, "Everybody procrastinates at one lime or another, over one thing or another. The trick is knowing what you procrastinate over, how, and why." There may be a certain type of assignment you put off, or a certain time of day you tend to procrastinate. Also be conscious of what you tend to do instead. Unplug the TV or computer, turn on the answering machine, or do whatever you have to do to avoid these obstacles.

While you're studying, try to become interested in the topic. "If a subject is boring to you, find a friend who likes it and ask why," suggests Dr. Jeanne Shay Schumm in her book School Power. "Read a magazine article, watch a video about it, or surf the Internet for material on that subject."

What about daydreaming? Dr. Schumm says, "If you start to fade or daydream, stop. Stand up, stretch, jump up and down, munch an apple, or take a short nap--if you really need it."

Being focused on the task at hand, well-organized, and efficient will take you a long way toward reaching your goals at school and later in a career.

Outplay: Test-Taking Secrets

Knowledge is power when it comes to doing well on tests--but this knowledge goes beyond knowing the material.

1. Find out as much as you can about the test from your teacher.

Ask these types of questions:

* Will the test cover everything from the whole year, or just information since the last test?

* What format will it be (multiple choice, short answer, essay, etc.)? If it's more than one format, what parts will be worth the most points?
* Will the test take the whole class period?

* Are we allowed to bring anything (such as a note card with formulas or a calculator for math class)? Your teacher might have even forgotten to mention that it's an open-book test!

Don't be embarrassed about asking these questions--chances are, almost everyone else wants to know, too.

If your teacher offers to spend class time reviewing before a test, always come prepared with questions. He or she may move on to new material if no one asks anything.

**Survivor tips:**

"I'm kind of quiet, so whenever I have a question for a teacher, I turn to someone near me who is outgoing," says Lisa, 18, of Storrs, Connecticut. "I ask, 'What do you think will be on this test?' And it never fails--he'll turn toward the teacher and ask the question himself."

Matt, 16, of Stanford, Connecticut, offers this advice: "If your teacher says something more than once, it's going to be on a test. And if he tells you to write it down, it's going to be on a test."

2. **Use what you've learned about the test.** Here are some tips for studying for certain types of tests:

* Flash cards are ideal for tests when you have to know the meanings of terms.

* When trying to remember important names and dates, try making a timeline or composing a song or poem.

* For essay tests, Dr. Schumm suggests thinking up some possible questions and writing what you would say. Then go over your essays "with a teacher's eye." How could they be better? What have you forgotten?

3. **Form a study group to teach others about the material you're comfortable with and get help with what you're not.** Remember that study groups aren't a substitute for studying on your own. Each member should prepare ahead of time. Here are some rules for running an effective study group:

* Have an agenda What material do you need to cover? Each member can choose a section to concentrate on before the group meets.

* Take turns "presenting" each of your sections to the group. Then quiz the group on some practice questions. Finally, everyone can brainstorm other questions that might come up on the test.

4. **Do your best during the test.** After all of your hard work, you don't want nerves to take over on test day. Here's how to get through the experience:
* It sounds simple, but don't forget to read the directions carefully. What may look like a standard true--false section, for instance, might actually call for changing false statements to make them true.

* "Do a mind dump," says Dr. Hopper, after you've read through the test. "Make notes of anything you think you might forget. Write down things that you used in learning the material that might help you remember."

* Answer the easy questions first, Dr. Hopper says. "This will give you the confidence and momentum to get through the rest of the test."

* Look over the test after you've finished. Many test-taking experts say that your first instinct is usually best. But a study of more than 1,000 students by a University of Michigan professor found that answers were changed from wrong to right 2.5 times more often than they were changed from right to wrong.

* For essays, first create a mini-outline. It will help keep your thoughts organized; and if you run out of time, your teacher may give you partial credit.

* In multiple choice tests, the answer "all of the above" is often the correct one, says Dr. Hopper. For true--false tests, don't assume the answer is false unless you know it is--true is usually a better guess.

* Ignore classmates who finish before you. "It's a myth that top students finish first," says Dr. Schumm.

Being a committed learner and taking responsibility for your own learning are important parts of being successful--not only in school, but also at work. Employers appreciate employees who learn willingly and expand their job skills.

**Outlast: Coping Clues**

While it probably ranks as the most stressful, school is just one aspect of your life. And sometimes life spins out of control. How do you fit in all of your commitments and interests? Take note of the following stress-management tips:

1. **Prioritize your life.** Donald Martin, author of the book How to Be a Successful Student, advocates using a "3-List Method":

* Use a weekly calendar. List everything from study time and work to relaxation time. "Keep your schedule handy and refer to it often," he says. "If it doesn't work, change it."

* Write down "things to do" each day. Write down everything you want and need to do for the day. You can refer to it and decide what is most important.
* **Set goals.** What do you want to accomplish over the next month or year? This list can help you to "develop long-term goals and to free your mind to concentrate on today," Martin says.

If ranking your to-do list is difficult, Wilson suggests asking yourself which activities are both important and urgent Also, he believes that "truly important tasks require a timeline from the due date, working back to the start."

Check yourself throughout the day to see if you're using your time wisely. Everybody needs time to relax, but spending hours each day just hanging out is too much.

**Survivor tips:**

Lou, 18, of Milford, Connecticut, says a to-do list "keeps you in line and helps you get your priorities straight."

"I think about the long-term effects of each activity, and I do the ones that will play the biggest factor in my future," says Kody, 17, of Sandy, Utah.

2. **Set realistic goals.** According to Dr. Hopper, a use go as five elements: It is specific, measurable, challenging, realistic, and achievable by a certain date. An example: "My goal is to improve my English grade from a C to a B by next semester."

Breaking your goal into several smaller steps with deadlines of their own can make achieving it more manageable. To improve your English grade, think of every homework assignment, test, and paper as a mini-deadline and another chance to move closer to the goal.

**Survivor tips:**

Noeleen, 14, from Philadelphia, decided she wanted to be ranked first in her class. "I have to do well throughout the whole year," she told herself. After dedicating herself to her studies, Noeleen reached her goal.

Katherine, 15, from Shirley, New York, wants to become a professional singer someday, which she realizes will not be easy. "I am already working on it by writing record companies and sending tapes," she says.

3. **Find ways to relax.** Research shows that stress doesn't affect people as much when they have friends and family to lean on. Whether it's talking to friends online, going out with friends, or spending time with your pet, turning to a loved one helps when you're stressed. Other popular ways to relax include the following:

* Listening to music or playing an instrument

* Working out or playing a sport

* Writing or drawing
* Taking a bath

* Spending time outside

* Sleeping! What feels like stress could just be exhaustion.

Setting priorities, organizing your time, and simply relaxing are strategies that will help you cope throughout your life. If your boss asks you to stay late on a Friday to help manage a crisis, for example, you should take a deep breath, adjust your after-work plans, and pitch in where you're needed.

With all of the skills described above, you will find that surviving school gets a whole lot easier. Keep in mind the rules of how to "Outwit, Outplay, and Outlast." Your reality, now and in the future, will be success!

**What Would You Do?**

Write down how you might survive each of these tough situations, and then ask your classmates for their ideas.

* Just before an oral presentation, you realize you got the assignment wrong.

* Your teacher creates a study group for you, and one of your partners is a former friend.

* You have a test tomorrow, but your close friend is upset about an argument with another friend.

* You have more than enough to do at work, and your boss hands you another project.