

# EFFECTIVE COLLEGE LEARNING

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## Chapter 7

# Figuring Out the Task

Read this chapter to answer the following questions:

- WHAT DO WE MEAN BY TASK?
- HOW IS THE TASK COMMUNICATED?
- HOW CAN YOU FIGURE OUT WHAT YOUR PROFESSOR EXPECTS?
- WHAT TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY MIGHT PROFESSORS INCORPORATE INTO THEIR COURSES?



### SELF-ASSESSMENT

DIRECTIONS: Rate the following tasks. Place an *E* beside the tasks you consider the easiest, an *M* beside the tasks you consider a middle level of difficulty, and a *D* beside the tasks you consider the most difficult.

1. \_\_\_\_ Taking a matching exam in history
2. \_\_\_\_ Analyzing a chemical process for a chemistry lab
3. \_\_\_\_ Writing a persuasive essay for English class
4. \_\_\_\_ Evaluating and drawing a conclusion about several articles presenting conflicting accounts of an event for political science class
5. \_\_\_\_ Taking a multiple-choice exam over two psychology chapters
6. \_\_\_\_ Taking an exam over the bold-faced terms for a biology class
7. \_\_\_\_ Debating a controversial issue in sociology class
8. \_\_\_\_ Giving an informational speech for speech communications class
9. \_\_\_\_ Solving calculus problems on a mathematics exam

How you rated these tasks probably had something to do with your own personal background and interests. For example, if you love mathematics you might think solving calculus problems is easy. However, there are some overarching ideas that make numbers 1 and 6 the easiest; numbers 2, 5, 8, and 9 somewhere in the middle; and numbers 3, 4, and 7 the most difficult tasks. You'll learn why in this chapter.

# What Is a Task?

In Chapter 6 we introduced the idea that there are four factors that impact learning, and briefly discussed the role that task understanding plays in being an active learner. We will talk about task understanding here in greater detail because much of your success as a college student rests on your ability to interpret the tasks in your courses. There's more to studying and being an effective student than meets the eye and "studying hard" is not always "studying smart." Your ability to understand what your professor wants you to do and the way you are supposed to do it goes a long way toward making you a more efficient and effective student. Why? To answer this question, we'll explore two important aspects of task: What we mean by "task" and how you go about figuring out what the task is. Although the specific tasks in your courses will vary depending on the content, the professor, and the discipline, the task for any course consists of two parts:

1. The type of activity in which you engage.
2. The level of thinking required as you engage in the activity.



## NETWORKING

### Using the Web to Understand Task

Find the Web page of one of your professors and look for information concerning task. For example, if you have multiple-choice exams, look to see whether your professor has put any example test items on the site. Also check out online information about the course. Sometimes rather than putting material concerning tests and other course requirements on their own personal Web page, professors will have a separate page for each course they teach. These pages can provide a wealth of information to help you better understand the task.

# Part One: The Type of Activity

The activity you will be asked to engage in for a class is usually a test, a paper, or a project which your instructor will use to evaluate you. But knowing what the activity is isn't enough information to be able to carefully select an appropriate approach to the task.

## TESTS. YOU NEED TO KNOW THE TYPE OF TEST YOU WILL TAKE

- Is it an objective exam, which includes multiple-choice, true/false, or matching items?
- Is it a subjective exam that requires answering essay, short answer, or identification questions?
- Is it a combination of both types?

Because you will approach studying for multiple-choice tests differently than you will approach studying for essay tests, it's very important to know right from the beginning the basic type of test you will have. As we will discuss in greater detail later in the book, the kind of reading you do, the way you think about the material, and the strategies you select all have a bearing on the kinds of tasks you are asked to complete in a course.

The importance of precisely knowing the task can be explained by describing a situation that occurred to students enrolled in a large, lecture history course. For each test, students were told that they would have "objective items" and two essay questions. On the first four exams, these objective items were always multiple-choice. When it came time for the final exam, the professor **reiterated** that they would have a test that was part objective and part essay and they assumed that they would once again have multiple-choice questions. Imagine their surprise when the tests were distributed and the objective items were fill-in-the-blanks. Many students were outraged and went to see the professor when they discovered that they had done poorly on the test. But the professor wouldn't budge. His definition of task for objective items included fill-in-the-blank as well as multiple-choice. The point here is clear: Get as much specific information as possible about the test. Ask the right questions. Just knowing that you will have an objective test is likely to be insufficient information.

## PAPERS OR PROJECTS

If the task in a course consists of papers or projects rather than exams, the same advice about precisely knowing the task holds true. Talk with your professor about specific aspects of the paper, especially if the requirements seem unclear. In political science courses on our campus, for example, students must do a project that consists of several different pieces. First they select a political issue to follow throughout the term. They must subscribe to and read the *New York Times* daily and find a minimum of thirty articles concerning their issue. For each article they must write a brief summary. At the end of the term, they complete two additional tasks. First they write a policy statement and then they write a memo to an influential political figure about the issue. Students who fail to understand how to carry out the numerous pieces involved in this task have severe problems in doing well on a long-term project that is 30 percent of their grade.

Before reading the next section, read the "Research Into Practice" segment. This piece of research suggests that you can tell the difficulty of a task just by observing students' nonverbal behaviors.

## SUCCESS AT A GLANCE

### Thinking About the Task

Type of Task + Level of Thinking = Task Knowledge  
 Matching exam + Memorization  
 Multiple choice + Analysis  
 Essay/short answer + Synthesis

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

## A Case Study of How Students Figure Out Task

In this article, Drs. Simpson and Nist followed and interviewed ten students enrolled in a large-lecture introductory history course over an entire term. Some of these students performed very well, some were average, and some were below average in their test scores. The researchers were interested in determining the factors that enabled some of the students to earn As and Bs, while others failed. Although they found that the high-performing students used more efficient and effective study strategies, the more important finding was that they understood what their professor expected from them. They correctly interpreted the task, which was to write essay answers that called for synthesis and analysis in a well-structured format, and selected their strategies for studying *after* they had determined the task. In other words, their task definition drove their strategy choice, not vice versa. Drs. Simpson and Nist concluded that:

... when we reflected on the congruency between the professor's and students' perceptions of task, we concluded that Dr. Stack [the professor] did communicate the task to students in a variety of explicit and implicit ways. . . The HPG [high performing group] had little problem in determining what it was that Dr. Stack wanted them to do. . . However, the LPG

[low performing group] . . . failed to "accommodate" Dr. Stack and his communication about the task.

Drs. Simpson's and Nist's finding about the importance that task interpretation plays in learning and studying in college is an important one. If you don't know precisely what it is your professor expects from you, you are doomed to struggle, at best becoming frustrated, and at worst making low grades. Simpson and Nist found that students in history, for example, often defined the task as memorizing names, dates, and facts, much as they had done in high school. But their college professors looked at history as more analysis and synthesis. Students who held fast to their high school model of memorizing to study history struggled all term with the course. Some, who never figured out the task, actually failed. The implications of this study for you, the student, are clear: Figure out the task and figure it out early in the term. Then select the strategies that will best fit your professor's expectations.

Source: M. L. Simpson, and S. L. Nist, "Perspectives on Learning History: A Case Study," *Journal of Literacy Research* 29, (1997): 363–395.

## STUDY TIP

Be sure you understand what your professor expects from you. Ask questions. Knowing what the task is right from the start enables you to select the appropriate strategies.

## Part Two: The Level of Thinking

Once you have identified the specific activities your professor expects, you're halfway there. The other part of task identification,—perhaps the more important part—is knowing the level of thinking that is required to carry out the task. There are many types of thinking that a professor may want you to engage in. Knowing the level of questions your professor asks can help you choose appropriate learning and study strategies.

Understanding of *Bloom's taxonomy*, a classification system that provides a way to categorize the kinds of questions that students typically encounter in their classes can be valuable in determining what you need to do for a course. Bloom discusses six levels of questioning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Each is briefly touched on below.

## 1. KNOWLEDGE

This includes knowledge of dates, events, major ideas, bold-faced terms.

- *Question Words:* list, define, describe, identify, match, name, what, who, when, where
- *Examples:* When was Earl Warren named as chief justice of the Supreme Court? Which president named him?
- What are food vacuoles?
- Define *parasomnias*.

## 2. COMPREHENSION

This includes grasping the meaning, explaining or summarizing, grouping, predicting outcomes, or inferring.

- *Question Words:* summarize, describe, interpret, distinguish, defend, explain, discuss, predict
- *Examples:* Explain the three different theories that account for people's behavior while they are under hypnosis.
- Describe the major components of LBJ's Great Society.
- Discuss the role of the small intestine in the digestion process.

## 3. APPLICATION

This level requires the ability to use the material in a new context, to solve problems, or to utilize rules, concepts, or theories.

- *Question Words:* apply, demonstrate, calculate, illustrate, show, relate, give an example of, solve
- *Examples:* If a plant with the genotype of BbCcDd was crossed with a plant that was BBCcdd, what are the chances of producing a plant with the genotype of BbCcDd?

- Apply what you know about normal sleep patterns to how major sleep disorders may be treated.

## 4. ANALYSIS

This involves understanding organization of parts, clarifying, concluding, or recognizing hidden meaning.

- *Question Words:* analyze, explain, compare and contrast, select, arrange, order
- *Examples:* Compare and contrast the effects of stimulants and depressants on the body and mind.
- Select the most appropriate method for solving this calculus problem.



## 5. SYNTHESIS

This involves creating new ideas, relating knowledge from several sources of information, predicting, drawing conclusions.

- *Question Words:* combine, create, design, formulate, compose, integrate, rewrite, generalize
- *Examples:* Rewrite the play *The Cherry Orchard* as if it were written by Ibsen.
- Design a program for an individual who is suffering from insomnia.

## 6. EVALUATION

This relies on the ability to make choices based on evidence, to support a stance with reasoning, to recognize subjectivity, to assess value of theories.

- *Question Words:* support, judge, discriminate, assess, recommend, measure, convince, conclude
- *Examples:* How successful would the proposed federal income tax cut be in controlling inflation as well as decreasing unemployment?
- Do you agree with President Johnson's decision to escalate the Vietnamese conflict? Why or Why not?

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. Toronto: Longmans, Green.

Many objective exams will have questions at each of these levels. Thus, you need to think about this part of the task and concentrate your studying efforts differently depending on the knowledge level required. Some students believe that objective exams don't involve higher-level thinking. That is, they think that multiple-choice and true/false tests are basically memorization tasks. However, on most objective tests, some of the questions will be factual in nature, some will ask for examples, and some will require you to synthesize and analyze. Most essay questions require the highest level of thinking, but other subjective exams, such as identification items, could ask for just factual information. Remember, unless you know the task and the types of thinking expected, you will have a difficult time selecting the appropriate study strategies. In the next section, we will give you some hints about how to get more information about the task.



## MONITOR YOUR LEARNING

Most college students do not consciously sit down at the beginning of the term and say to themselves, "Gee, before I start doing my reading and studying for this class, I'd better figure out the task!" For students who intuitively understand that it is important to figure out the course demands, it's more of an unconscious effort. Think about yourself as a learner and then respond to the following questions as a way of monitoring your learning about your knowledge of the tasks for your classes:

Have you taken time this term to figure out the task in each of your classes? If not, how might you begin to gather that information this term and in future terms?

Have you ever been in a class where you had a very difficult time understanding what the professor's expectations were? How did you handle that situation? What might you do differently now?

Can you think of any other sources that might be able to give you task information?

How might you organize your notes to draw attention to task information?

# How Is the Task Communicated?

Now that you understand how important it is to know the task for each of your classes, you might ask the obvious question: How do I figure out how to carry out the task? Because few professors will state the task precisely and completely, it becomes important for you to be able to piece together bits of information from a variety of sources in order to paint the picture for yourself.

## ATTEND CLASS EVERY DAY

The best place to begin, of course, is with what your professor says in class, especially in the early part of the term. Some professors **delineate** the task very neatly and clearly on the first day when they go over the syllabus. Others will give you a big picture of the task early in the term and then fill in the details as the course progresses. Still others, and perhaps most college professors fall into this category, give you a combination of implicit and explicit cues and expect you to pick up on those cues.

## WRITE IT DOWN

It's just as important to take notes concerning what's expected of you as it is to take notes on the content. Students often think that they will remember how to structure an essay or the types of questions that will be on their exams. However, they may discover two or three weeks later that they have only a faint recollection, or worse, no recollection at all, of some important piece of information that the professor had discussed in class. Go to class, listen carefully, and write down in your lecture notes what your professor says about the task.

## STUDY TIP

One of our favorite quotes comes from E. Jean Carroll who stated, "If Joan of Arc could turn the tide of an entire war before her 18th birthday, you can get out of bed." But we would like to add ". . . and go to class" to this quote. Attending every class is the one most important things you can do to help you not only stay on task, but also to better understand the specific tasks for each course.

## CONSULT YOUR SYLLABUS

Read your syllabus carefully at the beginning of the course and then return to it on a regular basis. Look for any statements that tell you about course expectations. Examine your syllabus for the following information:

- The number of tests you will have or papers you will have to write, and the approximate dates tests will be given or papers will be due.
- Your professor's office hours and phone number (or e-mail address) so that you know how to make an appointment to talk with her.
- Your professor's policies on make-up work or the consequences of missing an exam or another deadline.
- Your professor's attendance policies (if any).
- Your professor's philosophy on the course, which can give you insight into how your professor will approach the content and can go a long way in helping you define the task.
- The course objectives. Reading these statements will tell you what the professor hopes you will learn in the course.

All of these factors either directly or indirectly relate to task. Thus it is important not only to read your syllabus carefully at the beginning of the term, but also to refer to it often as the term progresses.

## ASK YOUR PROFESSOR TO SHOW SAMPLE QUESTIONS

Sample questions can give you information about the level of thinking and the types of questions your professor tends to use. Some professors even make old exams available to students. If so, avoid using them as a study guide because the professor will write the same types of questions on future exams, but will not ask the exact same questions.

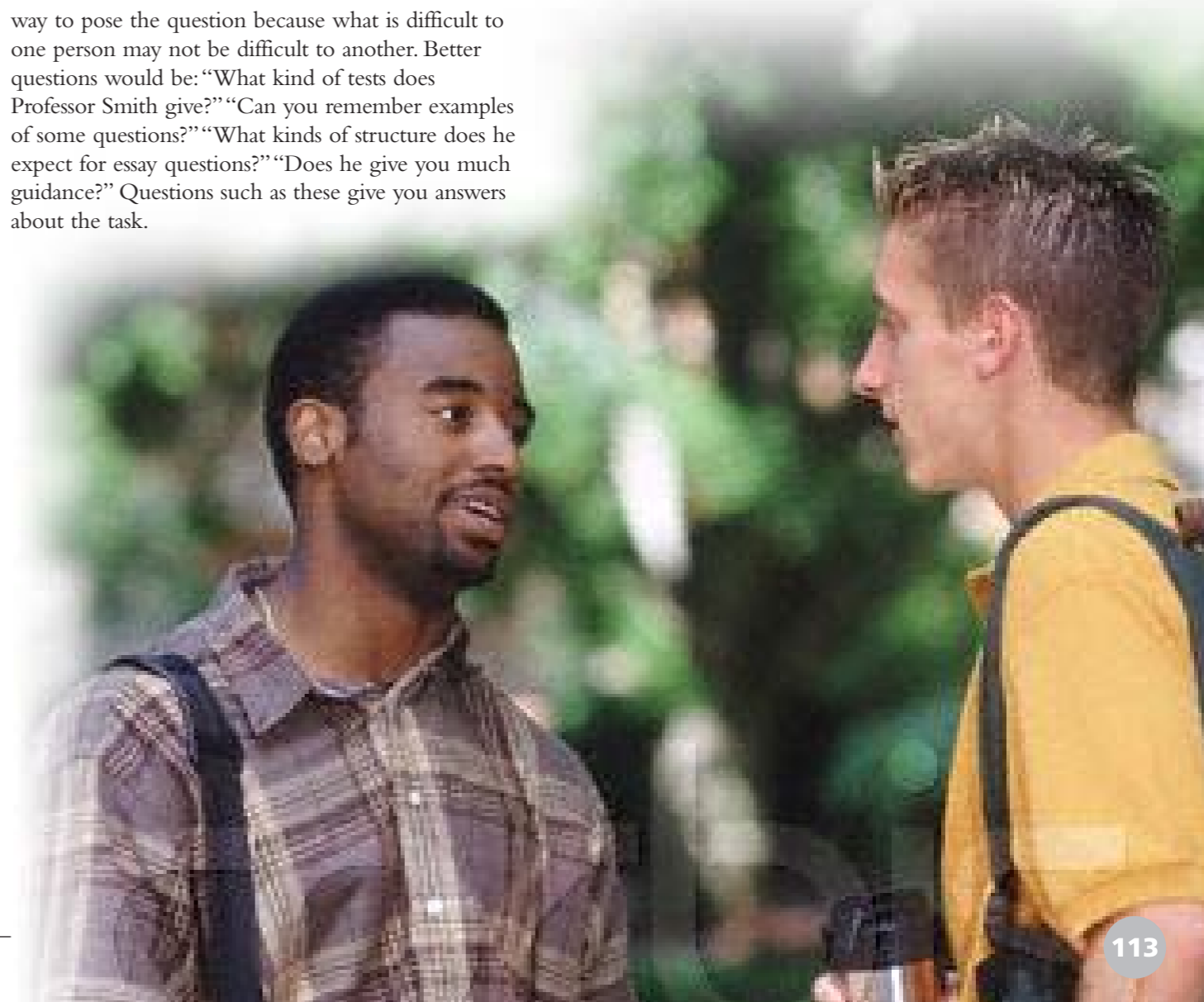
## ASK FORMER STUDENTS

Students who have already taken the course will be able to give you details about a course and a professor. But make sure that you ask former students the right questions. For example, asking someone, "Are Professor Smith's tests difficult?" is not the best way to pose the question because what is difficult to one person may not be difficult to another. Better questions would be: "What kind of tests does Professor Smith give?" "Can you remember examples of some questions?" "What kinds of structure does he expect for essay questions?" "Does he give you much guidance?" Questions such as these give you answers about the task.

## REALITY CHECK

### When All Else Fails

If you have exhausted all efforts to figure out the task in a course, go see your professor—especially if you have already taken one test and performed poorly. Starting a conversation with your professor by explaining what you are doing and asking her for advice about how to study may give you a lot more information about how she wants you to think about the course information. If you ignore the fact that you are in the dark about the task, and continue doing poorly in the course, you will only become frustrated.



# Technology in College Classes

Most of your college professors will incorporate technology (specifically computers and the Internet) into their classes. But expect to find a wide range in the level of integration. Some professors will be old school, low-tech holdouts who won't even have an e-mail account. Other professors will use high-tech presentations during class with extravagant special effects. Most professors fall somewhere in the middle and use technology where they find it to be most beneficial for explaining course content and supporting classroom instruction. You can expect to see some or all of the following uses of technology as part of the tasks in your college courses. And you will probably find several other ways that professors incorporate technology into their course tasks as new tools become available.

## COMPUTERIZED CLASS PRESENTATIONS (SUCH AS POWERPOINT)

Many professors use computer slides to outline their lectures. They may use overheads of diagrams or show video clips to emphasize points. They may also display Web pages or other Internet sources of information during class.

## COMPUTERIZED NOTES

It is becoming more common for professors to put their notes on the Web. Web notes are best used as a supplement or guide for taking your own notes in class (see Chapter 8 for strategies on using Web notes effectively). You may also find yourself in a classroom equipped with computers or computer hookups that allow you to take notes on a laptop. Such classrooms are equipped with the latest technology. This is a wonderful service that we suggest you take advantage of if it is available on your campus.

### STUDY TIP

Although more students bring laptops to class for taking lecture notes, more students are also using their laptops during lectures to do everything from surfing the Web to answering e-mail. On some campuses this has become such a huge problem that professors have actually banned laptops from their classrooms. A word to the wise: While you're in class, use your laptop for the purpose it was intended. It's a great tool for not only taking notes but also for organizing them after class.

## COMPUTER MODULES OR CD-ROM SUPPLEMENTS

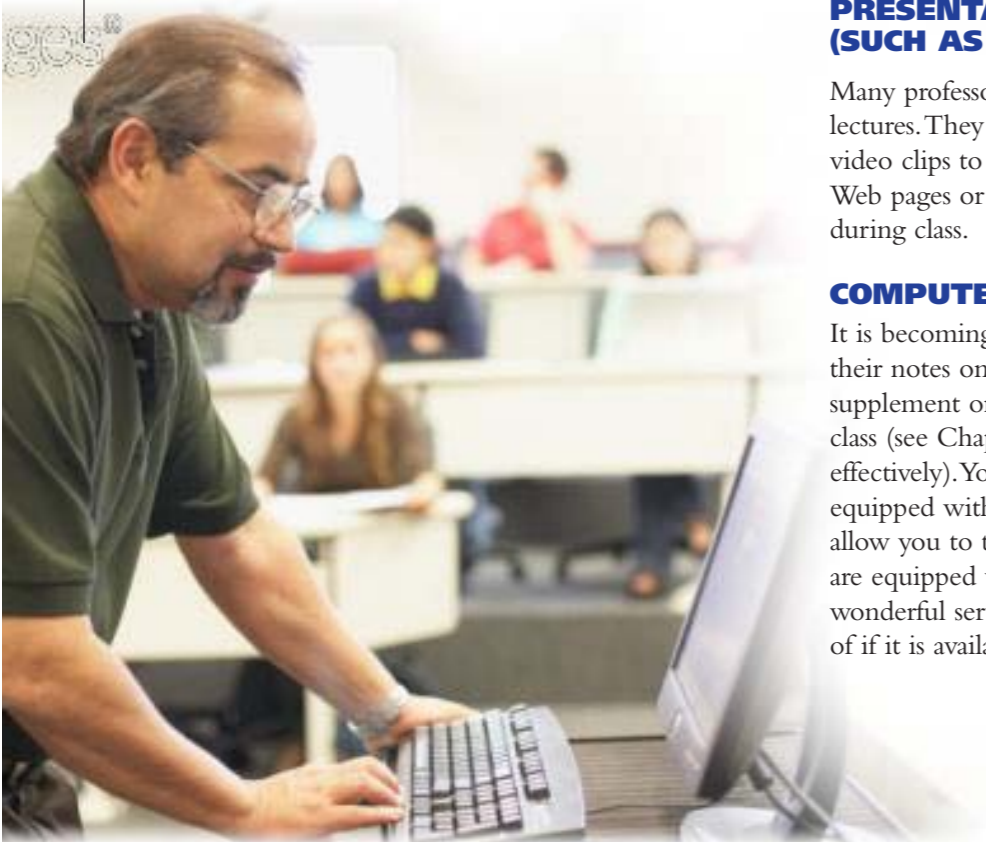
Some professors place sample questions or problems on the Web so that students can evaluate their understanding of the course material as they prepare for exams. Other professors (especially in the sciences) provide supplementary material on CD-ROMs. These CDs generally contain information that cannot be depicted in a text format, such as a video of a chemical reaction, but enhances the information discussed in a lecture or in the text.

## COMPUTERIZED COURSE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (SUCH AS WEB CT OR BLACK BOARD)

Professors using these course management systems are often quite **resolute** in their belief that such systems add another dimension to the course material. They may place their syllabi, quizzes, assignments, practice exams, and other course information there. They may also post student grades or have virtual chats with the class. We even know a professor who conducts exam reviews online. If your professor uses these systems, plan to visit the site often to keep up on new assignments and important information.

## COURSE EXAMS

Some courses will require you to take exams on a computer. Many mathematics courses are moving toward computerized exams. In addition, English professors may require students to write and submit essays via computers and then provide feedback on papers using computerized mark-up systems. Taking an exam on a computer is a bit different from the old paper and pencil type. But you should not abandon your traditional test-taking strategies. Continue to read each question carefully and answer the items you know first. However, you should find out whether you can return to a question or if you must answer each item before moving on to the next one. Some students say that having exams on computers takes some getting used to, but once you have some experience, it is just like taking any other test.



## READINGS

Your professors may assign readings that can only be found online. They may be from Web-based journals, supplied by the campus library's online service, or from any number of other sources. If you find you have trouble reading online, as many people do, we suggest you print it out in advance.

## E-MAIL ASSIGNMENTS

Professors may require you to submit assignments over e-mail. If it is a short assignment, typing your response straight into the e-mail message is generally acceptable. If, however, you are required to turn in a longer assignment (more than one page), it is best to type it in a word processing program and send it as a file attachment. Be sure to use the file type requested by your professor. If you do not know how to do this, go to the nearest computer lab to get some help.

## GROUP PRESENTATIONS

At some point in your college career, you will probably find yourself in a course that requires a group presentation that has a technology component. Some professors require a Web-based presentation or one that utilizes several types of media. We suggest that you meet with your group early and often and experiment with the technology several times before presenting it in class to work out any problems.

## DISCUSSION GROUPS AND LISTSERVS

These supports are used to generate discussion outside the class. Some professors even require each student to post a certain number of messages each week to ensure that the listserv is used. You can ask questions or see what other people are thinking to gain multiple perspectives on the course information.

## BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Returning students who have not been part of the technology loop may feel somewhat intimidated if their campus is high-tech or if most of their professors incorporate technology into their courses. If you find yourself in this situation, see if your campus offers either a formal course or workshops to help get you up to speed. More and more campuses are offering what are **generically** referred to as IT (information technology) literacy courses to teach students how to effectively use technology to learn.



## WORD WISE

1. **Reiterate** (v., p.107)—to say or do again or repeatedly.

In order to make sure that the class understood the task, the teacher **reiterated** the details of the assignment.

2. **Delineate** (v., p.112)—to sketch out; describe; outline.

Before they could begin their game of touch football, the two teams had to **delineate** the boundaries.

3. **Resolute** (adj., p.115)—firm or determined; unwavering.

Lamar was **resolute** in his belief that if he studied for 40 hours per week he would keep his scholarship.

4. **Generic(ally)** (adj., p.117)—general; not having a trademark or a brand name.

When they are available, most doctors will prescribe **generic** drugs for their patients since they tend to be less expensive.

REAL COLLEGE

TANYA'S TASK

DIRECTIONS: Read the following scenario and respond to the questions based on the information you learned in this chapter.

Tanya decided that she could no longer put off getting her lab science requirement out of the way, especially because she has to endure two semesters of it once she makes her selection. She "hates science with a passion," and would much rather simply pursue her major courses in creative writing. It's not that she hasn't done well in science. In fact, because her grades in high school biology classes were quite good, she decided that she would go ahead and take biology in college rather than chemistry, which gave her nightmares in high school. She sees herself as a good memorizer and since her high school biology experience involved lots of memorization of terms



and labeling diagrams she tended to make good grades. But, the fact remains: She just doesn't like science of any type, plain and simple.

As Tanya looks over her class schedule for the term, she thinks about skipping the first class or two, because from her perspective, two fewer biology classes to go to would be a good thing. But her roommate, who has already taken the course, advises her to attend every class—even the first one. Tanya reluctantly takes the advice and actually thought the professor was engaging and humorous.

Obviously, in order to earn a good grade in this course, Tanya is going to have to figure out what the tasks are. On the first day, the professor said that there would be three objective exams, lab reports, and a cumulative final, but he didn't say much else about the tasks.

What can Tanya do?

Think about Tanya's situation and respond to the following questions:

1. What additional information do you think Tanya needs so that she can have a clearer idea of the task?

.....  
.....

2. How should she go about gathering the necessary information?

.....  
.....

3. How will Tanya's dislike of science influence the way she might approach this course?

.....  
.....

ADD TO YOUR PORTFOLIO

For each of your classes this term answer the following questions related to task:

1. What is the task for this course? Start by looking at the syllabus, e-mailing the professor, or talking to a TA.

Course 1 .....

Course 2 .....

Course 3 .....

Course 4 .....

2. Write down the specific tasks and how you figured out what the professor expected from you.

Course 1 .....

Course 2 .....

Course 3 .....

Course 4 .....

3. What clues did he give that helped you figure it out?

Course 1 .....

Course 2 .....

Course 3 .....

Course 4 .....

4. Finally, think about how you will approach each course based on the task. How should you approach studying for each exam?

Course 1 .....

Course 2 .....

Course 3 .....

Course 4 .....

As the term progresses, reread your assessment of what you thought the tasks were and see if you were correct.