Write that down!

Hammad Ali

FIRST of all, a disclaimer is in order. This writer is not an authority on the subject of effective study techniques, and does not have any formal education on the subject. Whatever I say in this piece, I say based on my own experiences and experimentations. The suggestions I give are by no means a guaranteed panacea, but simply ideas that worked for me. There is a very good chance that they will work you, but there is just as good a chance that they won't. The only way you can find out is to try it out for yourself.

That being said, let's move on to what this write-up really is about. Being a senior year student who is almost about to graduate, I have had to face a lot of difficult challenges in the last four years of undergraduate studies, and have tried out a variety of techniques to see what lets me perform my best and face all my day-to-day chores without feeling overwhelmed. Of course, there are so many categories in which a student might want to improve, ranging from time and stress management to how one can face, and fare well in, the many novel challenges that are sure to present themselves during four years of college. Today I will deal with just one topic, the one that seems most relevant to me in the current context. Depending on how I can explain this topic, and reader response if any, I might want to write about certain other topics over the next few weeks.

Document. That one word can do wonders for your performance in class, during meetings and group study sessions and even in improving your writing skills. What I refer to by this word is basically the act of taking down notes. Be it in class, or while brainstorming with a group of classmates, take down notes. Don't put off something saying that you will remember it. You may remember it if you are dealing only with that particular project at the moment, but any more complexity than that and you are very likely forget, or recall only fuzzily a lot of the things that you were supposed to recall completely and perfectly. The time and effort you supposedly save by not bothering to write things down is not worth anything if you cannot remember what needs to be done, and have to spend an hour gathering all the information that would have been right in your hands if only you had taken the trouble of noting it down then and there. Ask yourself which is better, having all the important points from a class in about ten to fifteen sheets of paper, or having to call up three or four people for clarifications the night before that big exam? If you chose the latter, save yourself some time by not reading the rest of this article. You will need it to make those calls.

If you are reading this, you obviously chose the former. Now let me tell you how you can go about this. Before that, let me make one thing clear. The act of taking notes in class is rather common. Most of us do it. Some of us overdo it, noting down stuff that is already in the handouts or the textbook and sometimes even things that the teacher says during a small break during class (yes, I have seen people jot down something while the teacher was talking about his school days). As such, I will not focus on this side of the matter. Rather, I will try and offer suggestions on how one can use this same habit in meetings, during group work and even to manage time better. Firstly, always keep pen and paper handy. It doesn't have to be a bound diary and an expensive fountain pen. A small rough pad and a regular ball-pen will do just fine. When somebody gives you a particular chore to do, even something as simple as making a few calls or getting some printouts, make a note of it. The next time you have some time to spare, scan through the list. You are sure to find a good number of assignments that you can get done with then and there, saving a lot of time and the need to panic and rush through those tasks at some later time. Stuck with a two-hour gap between classes? Wouldn't this be a good time to get those photocopies or finish up that math assignment saving you some time in the evening?

So that is how noting down things to do can help you manage your time better. How about helping you with the big end-of-term project? There is a good chance you will be given a project somewhere in the middle of the semester, and either asked to choose your group members or be assigned a group by the teacher. Either way, the whole project will not be done in one day. Ideally, there will be an initial plan, some progress, problems will arise and will have to be dealt with in and finally the project will come together and hopefully, look beautiful. Now, what should you be doing during these meetings, when different members come up with their own ideas and problems and the end product is supposed to be a solution to the problems and a way to integrate all the good ideas? Fancy doing it while keeping everything everyone said in memory? Go ahead, give it a shot. If you don't mix it all up and start feeling disoriented, apply to CalTech. If you do, bring out the pen and paper and start taking notes.