



Academic Survival Skills Checklists: 5 Ways to Help Students to Become Effective Self-Managing Learners

Students who hope to achieve success on the ambitious Common Core State Standards must first cultivate a set of general 'academic survival skills' that they can apply to any coursework (DiPerna, 2006). Examples of academic survival skills include the student's ability to study effectively, be organized, and manage time well.

When academic survival skills are described in global terms, though, it can be difficult to define them. For example, two teachers may have different understandings about what the term 'study skills' means. A solution is to complete a 'task analysis' of a given global academic-survival skill, dividing that larger skill into a checklist of component sub-skills (Kazdin, 1989). For an example of a component-skills checklist for 'study skills', see *Table 1: Academic Survival Skills Example: Study Skills*.

With a checklist in hand that breaks a global academic survival skill into components, a teacher can judge whether a student possesses those essential building-block strategies that make up a larger global 'survival skills' term. Teachers have access to good sources of information to verify what academic survival skills a student possesses, including direct observation; interviews (of the student, past teacher, or parent); and student work products.

TIP: Teachers can access a *free* web application to create customized student-skill checklists. The *Academic Survival Skills Checklist Maker* provides a starter set of strategies to address homework, note-taking, organization, study, test-taking, and time management. Teachers can use the application to create and print customized checklists and can also save their checklists online. This application is available at: <http://www.interventioncentral.org/tools/academic-survival-skills-checklist-maker>

Schools can find a number of valuable uses for 'academic survival skills' checklists, including the following:

1. *Consistent expectations among teachers.* Teachers at a grade level, on an instructional team, or within an instructional department can work together to develop checklists for essential global academic-survival skills. As teachers collaborate to create these checklists, they reach agreement on the essential skills that students need for academic success and can then consistently promote those skills across their classrooms.
2. *Proactive student skills training.* One excellent use of these checklists is as a classwide student training tool. At the start of the school year, teachers can create checklists for those academic survival skills in which students are weak (e.g., study skills, time management) and use them as tools to train students in specific strategies to remediate these deficiencies. Several instructors working with the same group of students can even pool their efforts so that each teacher might be required to teach a checklist in only a single survival-skill area.
3. *Student skills self-check.* Teachers can use academic survival-skills checklists to promote student responsibility. Students are provided with master copies of checklists and encouraged to develop their own customized checklists by selecting and editing those strategies likely to work best for them. Instructors can then hold students accountable to consult and use these individualized checklists to expand their repertoire of strategies for managing their own learning.



4. *Monitoring progress of academic survival-skills interventions.* Often, intervention plans developed for middle and high school students include strategies to address academic survival-skill targets such as homework completion or organization. Checklists are a good way for teachers to measure the student's baseline use of academic survival skills in a targeted area prior to the start of the intervention. Checklists can also be used to calculate a student outcome goal that will signify a successful intervention and to measure (e.g., weekly) the student's progress in using an expanded range of academic survival-skills during the intervention period.

For example, a teacher may develop a checklist (like that appearing in Table 1) outlining 11 sub-skills that define her expectations for 'study skills'. Through interview, direct observation, and examination of student work products, the teacher ascertains that the student reliably used 7 of the 11 skills during baseline. She sets the outcome goal that--at the conclusion of a 5-week intervention period--the student will reliably use all 11 of those study sub-skills. Once per week during the intervention, the teacher meets with the student to review the checklist, record which additional study skills--if any--the student is now using, and chart this growth on a simple visual graph.

5. *Parent conferences.* When teachers meet with parents to discuss student academic concerns, academic survival-skills checklists can serve as a vehicle to define expected student competencies and also to decide what specific school and home supports will most benefit the student. In addition, parents often appreciate receiving copies of these checklists to review with their child at home.

When students struggle with global academic survival skills such as study, organization, or time management, those deficits can seem so all-encompassing as to inspire a sense of helplessness. In contrast, targeted and prescriptive checklists (such as those described here) that outline practical strategies to enhance school survival skills can serve as a tool to focus and empower teachers, parents, and students to accomplish the shared goal of turning every student into a effective, self-managing learner.

References

- DiPerna, J. C. (2006). Academic enablers and student achievement: Implications for assessment and intervention services in the schools. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 7-17.
- Kazdin, A. E. (1989). *Behavior modification in applied settings* (4th ed.). Pacific Gove, CA: Brooks/Cole.



TABLE 1: ACADEMIC SURVIVAL SKILLS EXAMPLE: STUDY SKILLS

- MAINTAIN A STUDY SCHEDULE.** Maintain a regular (e.g., daily) study schedule with sufficient time set aside to review course content and information.
- AVOID DISTRACTERS.** When studying, avoid distracters (e.g., cell phone, television, Internet) that can erode study time and divert attention.
- CREATE AN ORGANIZED STUDY SPACE.** Prepare the study environment by organizing a space and setting out all necessary work materials before beginning study.
- SET STUDY GOALS.** Prior to a study session, define one or more specific study goals to accomplish (e.g., to review information for an upcoming quiz; to locate key information to include in an essay).
- MAKE A STUDY AGENDA.** If studying multiple subjects in one session, create a study agenda for that session with a listing of the key information to be reviewed for each subject and the time allocated for that review.
- DO THE TOUGH STUDY WORK FIRST.** Tackle the most difficult or challenging study objectives first during study sessions, when energy levels and ability to concentrate are at their peak.
- VARY ACTIVITIES.** Mix up study activities during a study session (e.g., alternating between reading and writing) to maintain engagement and interest.
- CHUNK A LARGE STUDY TASK INTO SMALLER UNITS.** If studying a large amount of material in a single session, 'chunk' the material into smaller units and take short breaks between each unit to maintain focus.
- TEACH CHALLENGING CONTENT.** When studying complex or challenging material, assume the role of instructor and attempt to explain or describe the material to a real or imagined listener. Teaching study material is an efficient way to verify understanding.
- HIGHLIGHT QUESTIONS.** When reviewing notes or completing course readings, use highlighters, margin notes, sticky notes, or other notation methods to flag questions, unknown vocabulary terms, or areas of confusion for later review with teacher or tutor.
- SEEK HELP WHEN NEEDED.** Approach the teacher or tutor for help as needed to answer questions or clear up areas of confusion identified during study sessions.