

HOW TO SUCCEED IN COLLEGE

everything that took me
from a D in remedial
math to As at Oxford

sara laughed



*Dedicated to my little brother, who's not so little anymore.
I've learned more from being your sister than I ever will in a classroom.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hi there! I'm Sara. I'm currently in my final year at a Massachusetts liberal arts college, where I study religion. I went to a public high school, and I took a gap year before coming to university. I spent my junior year studying abroad at Oxford University in England, and it was one of the best experiences of my life!

I run a [blog](#) where I write about college life and advice, among other things. Over the past few months alone, I have received dozens of emails asking for help on everything from getting motivated to taking notes to balancing life and college. Because of that, I wanted to put together a guide that would allow me to share all my advice with you, in the hopes that the things that have helped me will help you, as well.

A NOTE ABOUT THIS BOOK

Friend, let me tell you a secret.

I don't do every single thing listed in this book.

That's not to say that I haven't tried everything in these pages. What I mean is, I don't do all of these at once. I don't make a motivation chart *and* a collage. I don't always remember to check everything off my to-do list at the end of the day. And as I write this, my desk is an honest-to-goodness *mess*.

This book is not a checklist, a to-do list, or a prescription. It's a collection of tips and tricks from someone who's been there, and who's still trying to improve and be her best self every day.

When you're reading, don't worry if something doesn't sound like it will work for you. You don't have to try, or keep track of, every single thing in this guide. Instead, read it and pick up the tips that are most likely to help you succeed. Apply and modify them in a way that makes sense for you and your life.

Let's get started.



1

INTRODUCTION

If you had told me when I was thirteen years old that I would one day write an eBook about doing well in school, I would have laughed my head off.

I wasn't always a good student. I got a 60% on my eighth grade math final. In my freshman year of high school, I was in the lowest-level math class, and I regularly didn't turn in my homework. I was always behind on assignments. I just couldn't be bothered to do them.

And then, from one day to the next, everything changed.

I was making up a biology lab after school one day, struggling with something or other. My teacher came over and tried to help, but I just couldn't get it. Finally she said, "It's fine. Just skip this question."

I realized that she didn't think I could do it. In her eyes, I had gone from someone who didn't apply herself to someone who legitimately didn't understand, and couldn't do, the work. I wondered who else saw me that way. My other teachers? My parents? My friends?

I came home that day and spent hours typing up the lab report. I poured my heart and soul into those few pages. (Or, well, maybe not. But I really did try!) I was determined to show my teacher that I could do the work. And when I finally got the assignment back, there it was. My first A.

As I write this now, I'm sitting in my dorm room at Oxford University for my year abroad. I have brought myself up from almost failing, back in eighth grade, to an A student today. More than that, I'm happy. My life is balanced. I enjoy school and I'm trying to make the most out of my college experience.

That's why I'm writing this eBook. I want to help you become the person you can be. I want to share with you everything I've learned about learning: how to read for a class, how to write an essay, how to study for an exam. And I want to share how I found balance and happiness while doing it. Because if I can do it, so can you.



2

MOTIVATION

Lately, I've been starting every guide to college the same way: with a section on motivation. If you're not motivated to be organized, write a good essay, or study for your exam, you won't succeed. But finding motivation is easier said than done.

So what do I do to stay motivated?

A few things.

IN THIS CHAPTER

This chapter will cover my favorite motivational ideas and a few different ways that you can motivate yourself at the beginning of your semester. It will also give advice on staying motivated as the semester goes on!

MY FAVORITE THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

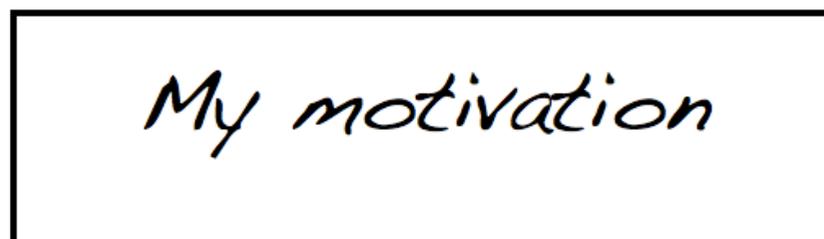
I have a few quotes and reminders that I like to remember when I'm not feeling motivated to do work:

- **Everybody started somewhere.** Whether your personal hero is Steve Jobs, Beyoncé, or your mom, they started just where you are. They got to where they are now with hard work and dedication.
- **Anything can be learned.** It just takes time and effort.
- **Intelligence is not fixed.** You have the opportunity, *every day*, to learn more and grow as a person.
- **Your past doesn't define you.** Just because you got a C in math last year doesn't mean you can't get an A now.
- **Everyone faces obstacles.** Your struggles do not define you; what matters is how you deal with them.

MAKING A MOTIVATION CHART

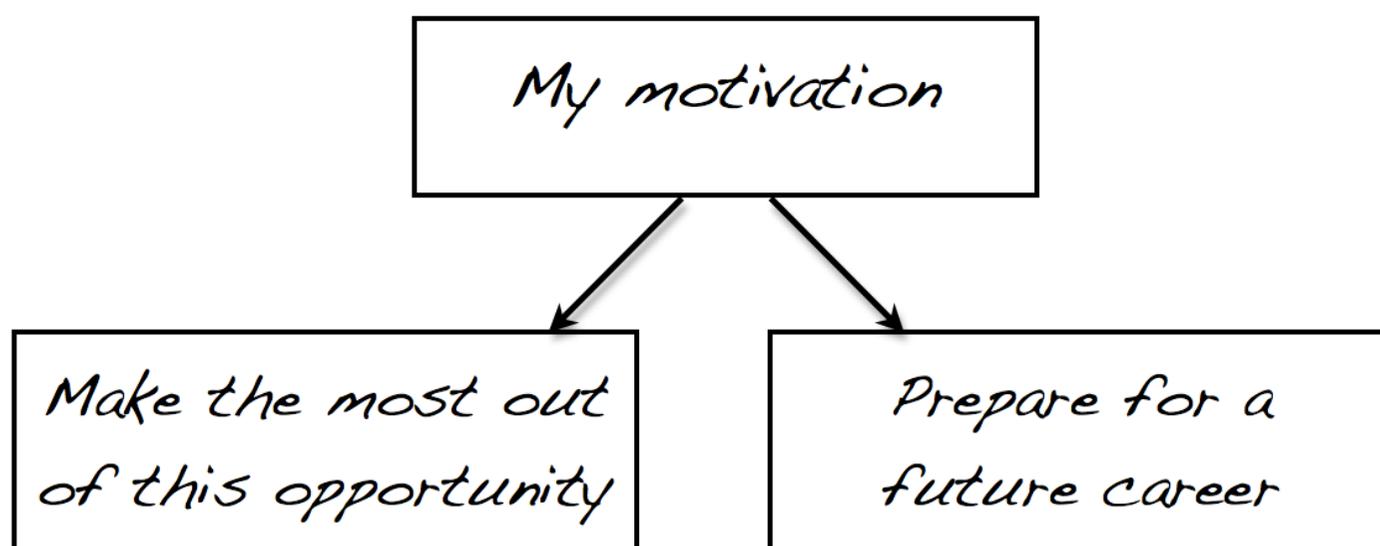
The first thing I do to get motivated is make a motivation chart. Remembering the concepts that motivate me to work hard helps me stay focused. For that reason, having a visual reminder to hang up on my wall is useful for me. This exercise is word-oriented, so if you are a more visual person, skip on to the next section for how to make a motivation collage.

Here's how I make my motivation charts: take out a pen and paper. Now draw a little box in the center of the paper, and write "My motivation" in it. (Yes, really. I'll wait!)



Next, think about the things that have motivated you in the past to do well in school. Here's an example: one of the things that helps me motivate myself is remembering what a big chance I've been given by going to college at all. Not everyone is given the opportunity to go to university, and the fact that I am able to be here is a huge gift. I want to make the most out of that experience.

I also want to make sure that I can one day find a fulfilling career and provide for a family. In order to do that, I need to do well in school, to prove to future employers that I am hard-working, committed, and capable of handling difficult work. So from the "My motivation" box, I draw two lines. At the end of one, I write, "make the most out of this opportunity." At the end of the other, I write "prepare for a future career."



Now it's your turn. If my examples don't motivate you, that's fine! Find a few things that do. Brainstorm for a little while about the things that make you feel excited and passionate about work, then plot them down on your chart. Here are a few options to consider:

- Making your parents or family members proud.
- Impressing your professors.
- Learning as much as you can about an interesting topic.
- Getting the grades to qualify for study abroad or an internship you want.
- Making the dean's list.
- Getting into a competitive graduate or medical school.
- Growing your own self-confidence.
- Leaving the future as open as possible to opportunities and success.

Tack or tape the chart to the wall or above your desk, to remind yourself when you get discouraged of why you're working so hard in the first place!

MAKING A MOTIVATION COLLAGE

A motivation collage is a good alternative to a motivation chart for those of you who are not word-oriented. If you don't see yourself being motivated by a motivation chart, try making a collage, similar to an inspiration board. Again, looking at a collection of things that inspire or motivate me to work helps me stay on track when the going gets tough. I also really enjoy motivation collages because they become a beautiful collection of the things that matter to you.

Here's how to do it: gather magazines and newspapers and cut out the images and words that inspire you. The images don't need to make sense; my motivation collage has a suitcase (travel!) next to a bookshelf (learning!) next to a girl in a gold sequin dress (celebrate life!). As long as it makes you feel inspired, don't question it. Glue the snippets onto a piece of poster paper, and hang it in your room to look at when you get discouraged. I keep mine on the cork board next to my desk. It takes up a lot of space, but it motivates me and makes me happy when I look at it.

MAKING GOALS

The next thing I do to stay motivated is make goals. Setting goals is a great way to keep yourself accountable, and they also break down your bigger hopes and dreams into actionable steps.

Make goals activity-based; for example, “I want to turn in all my assignments on time,” or “I want to do all the extra credit opportunities available.” Activity-based goals are a better alternative to achievement-based goals, like “I want to get at least 3 A’s this semester.” Here’s why: there is only so much you can do to control the grades you get; if you try your best, you may still not get the grade you want. A healthier approach is to focus on what you *can* control, and make the most out of that. Results are important, but they’re not the most important thing. What matters is that you’re applying and challenging yourself.

MOTIVATING YOURSELF LONG-TERM

Here are a few tips and support systems that you can put in place to set you up for a motivated semester:

- **Acknowledge your achievements when they happen.** Recognizing that your hard work has paid off, and rewarding yourself when that happens, may make you feel more capable and successful when the time comes to start your next task.
- **Reflect on your goals.** Every few weeks, look back on your goals list or your motivation chart or collage, and see if it still works for you. If not, change it, or scrap it and start over. You change, and so do the things that motivate you. Your goals should reflect that.
- **Build a support network.** I would not be where I am in life if it wasn’t for my family and friends. They help me by spending time with me when I need to relax, but also by being honest with me when I’m procrastinating and need to get to work. More than that, they support me and make me feel capable and confident. Try to build a network of people you can trust and rely on during the hard times,

and who will celebrate alongside you when things are going well. If you already have friends at your college, leaning on them in stressful times will hopefully deepen your friendship.

These tips help me stay not only motivated, but also happy and balanced as the school year goes on.

IF YOU NEED MOTIVATION RIGHT NOW

Sometimes, despite the ground work you've done in motivating yourself, you get stuck. It happens to all of us. Here are three tips that help me break through that kind of procrastinatory rut:

- **List three positive results** that will come from completing whatever you're putting off.
- **Think about the parts of the task that you enjoy.** Do you get a rush from writing? Does it make you feel good about yourself when you cross things off your to-do list? Whatever it is, if you can think of a single thing you enjoy about the work you do, write it down or keep it in mind.
- **Give yourself a short break.** Sometimes I can't get to work because I'd much rather be doing something else, like writing or blogging. Giving myself twenty minutes to do that fun thing makes it easier for me to put it out of my mind and get to work afterwards.

If you're a procrastination expert, check out my chapter on procrastination on page 50!

WHEN YOU LOSE YOUR MOTIVATION

Try as we might, it's hard to stay motivated when the going gets tough and the semester drags onward. Here is some of my favorite advice from fellow college students and bloggers just like you:

*“What kept me going was thinking about where I was headed. **You can't bank on the future, but you can bank on yourself.** If you're confident in you, motivation is easy... Make healthy efforts toward balanced mental and physical health. Everything will be okay, even when it seems like it won't be. It will. Just breathe.”*

- Julia, [Miss Trend She](#)

“I stay motivated by staying organized... and getting lots of sleep! As long as I break everything down into small chunks, my work is always manageable.”

- Courtney, [As We Stumble Along](#)

“One way that I stay motivated is setting small, progressive goals and rewarding myself when I reach them. I stay very organized, and make sure I take breaks when I see that I'm getting over stressed. It's also important to take care of yourself mentally and emotionally; if you're overwhelmed then you need to put it all down and give yourself a break.”

- Lauren, [The Arizona Prepster](#)

TAKEAWAYS

- Anything can be learned with time and effort. All your heroes started where you are.
- Make a motivation chart or collage to inspire you at the beginning of the year.
- Make a list of goals to hold yourself accountable.
- Prioritize different areas of your life, in writing, to help you stay on-track.
- Motivate yourself long-term by acknowledging achievements and building a support network.
- Break a motivational rut by thinking about the positive outcomes of the work you're doing.
- Don't worry when you lose motivation; it happens to all of us. Just do your best to reflect on why you're doing this, and get back on the horse.