

# Learning Strategies: How to Take Charge of Your Learning

by Winston Sieck - April 15, 2015

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Do you feel in command of your own learning?

Do you learn well with good teachers and bad?

Or even if there isn't one at all?

With the wealth of information available today, you have more opportunity than ever to know nearly anything that is known.

You can go out and learn virtually anything you want. And that knowledge gives you power.

To do it, you need to get a grip on learning strategies that can help. You've probably come across some reasonable [study tips](#) and suggestions. But how do you think about them? How do you keep them straight in your mind (so they don't slip away)?

One way to think about learning strategies is from the perspective of "Self-Regulated Learning" (SRL). SRL is a scientific approach to [understanding study skills](#). The view from SRL is that learners tend to plan, monitor, and control some parts of their own cognition, motivation, behavior and learning environment. People who have learning strategies in each of these areas are fully in charge of their own learning.

Paul Pintrich of the University of Michigan outlined key phases of SRL in a way that can help organize and expand your learning strategies. He published his paper about [a framework for self-regulated learning](#) in *Educational Psychology Review*. I describe the phases below. With a few example learning strategies for each.

## Learning Strategies: Cognition

The first phase is about strategies learners can use to plan, monitor, and control their cognition. My (possibly biased) view is that cognition is central to learning strategies of all types.

Planning includes setting goals for your learning. Are you going to read about the water cycle to try to get a solid understanding of how it works? Or, do you just want to check off a homework assignment?

Another aspect of planning and preparation for learning is to refresh yourself on what you already know about the topic. Cognitive scientists sometimes call this learning strategy *activating prior knowledge* about the material to be studied. I guess that sounds more scientific. You can refresh yourself just by reflecting back on what you learned before. You can also literally go back and review old notes, books and the like.

To monitor your cognition means that you are keeping track of your progress toward your learning goals. Hopefully, the goals include understanding the material. Stop and ask yourself every once in a while – do I get this? If not, you may need to make a change.

Finally, you use strategies to control your learning and cognition. There are many strategies in cognition. Learning strategies are just one kind. Cognitive strategies can serve to aid your memory, learning, reasoning, thinking, problem solving, and decision making. Check out the [test your memory study strategy](#), for example.

## Learning Strategies: Motivation

Just as learners can regulate their cognition, they can also regulate their motivation. This includes attempts to plan, monitor and control your:

- Purpose for learning the material
- Judgment of your ability to learn the material
- Beliefs about the importance, usefulness, and relevance of the material
- Personal interest in the area

For example, suppose you just told yourself that you aren't really interested in the water cycle. And the text is very dense. You suddenly realize that you don't feel like doing your homework because of what you told yourself. That's monitoring.

Now, you can take control of your motivation by reminding yourself that last week you were trying to convince a friend about how important the environment is. And even though the text is not great, you can get something out of it. Especially if you stop every so often and explain to yourself what you just read. Tell yourself to keep trying. You know you can do it. Remind yourself of the [value of perseverance](#). To cap it off, you might promise yourself that you'll watch some TV or chat with your friends after you are done.

These are some learning strategies you can use to attempt to improve your motivation.

## Learning Strategies: Behavior and Environment

You can plan, monitor, and control both your behavior and situation to enhance your learning. Kind of like you do for your cognition and motivation.

Planning your time is one way to influence your own behavior. Time management includes making schedules for studying. Setting aside time for different learning activities.

Tests, quizzes, and grades are behavioral ways that we monitor learning. If you are learning on your own, trying to [explain your new knowledge](#) to others is a behavior that will let you know how well you've really got it.

One behavior strategy you can use to control your learning is to ask for help. Good learners know when,

why, and from whom to seek help. Don't be shy. Get help when you need it.

Suppose you notice that your study area is full of distractions, such as music, TV, talkative friends. You can then try to control it by removing the distractions. You can also plan ahead and set a specific place for learning.

Taking control of your environment for learning doesn't mean you always need to do it alone. Working with friends in study groups can be a useful way to influence your environment.

Learning may seem pretty rough sometimes. And it is. But you can do something about it.

You can improve your ability to learn by developing better learning strategies. I created a [study skills course](#) to help you practice techniques.

Some strategies help you absorb tough ideas more easily. Others help you keep up your motivation. To keep on trying. The last help you change your surroundings for study.

Keep these three kinds of learning strategies in mind. When you come across new techniques, think about where they fit in the scheme.

Do it to help remember them. To understand how they work. To take charge of your learning strategies.

Then put them to work. And keep getting better.

Image Credit: [huhulin](#)

Pintrich, P. (2004). A Conceptual Framework for Assessing Motivation and Self-Regulated Learning in College Students *Educational Psychology Review*, 16 (4), 385-407 DOI: [10.1007/s10648-004-0006-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-004-0006-x)

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