

#5b - Navigating Learning in Higher Education: Advice from a Professor with IH

Hi. I am a university professor, and I have idiopathic hypersomnia. In this guide, I share what I would want a student of mine to tell me if that student had a disability. I also describe some of the "tricks" or strategies and methods I have developed to help me survive academia in spite of my IH. This is not based on research, and I'm by no means an expert – I'm just sharing what has worked for me.

Disclaimer: *I am not a medical doctor. The advice I offer in this guide is not intended to supersede any policies specific to your university.*

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YOU ARE NO LONGER IN HIGH SCHOOL!

- In high school, teachers would often supply you with review packets prior to an exam. This is quite rare in college. For ideas about how to develop your own study guide, see the section below, titled "When It Comes to Studying."
- In high school, if I fell asleep in class or missed class altogether, I could make up for it by just reading the textbook on my own. There was nothing that the teacher said in class that was any different from what the textbook said. This is not the case in college. In the classes I teach now, I do assign a textbook, but there are many things that I discuss in lecture that are not in the textbook. This is because, in my field, I can bring in some of my own research/expertise to supplement the textbook. For my students, this means that taking notes in class is of utmost importance. See the section titled, "What to Do in Class" for ideas about effective note taking.

GENERAL TIPS

1. What to Tell Your Professor

If I didn't know anything about IH, and a student came to me and said, "I might be late to class because I can't always get up in the morning with my alarm. Can I be excused for late

arrivals to class?," I would say, "Absolutely not!" The student's story just sounds made-up! BUT, if the student gave me an official disabilities note, then I would know that the student has a real medical condition, and then I'd happily try to accommodate the student. As a professor, I really like this system.

A. By Registering with the Disabilities Services Office, you make it a lot easier for the Professor to work with you to meet your learning needs. The folks who run disability services offices are usually pretty awesome.

- You can get extra time on tests, you can get copies of other students' notes to supplement your own, and you might even get permission to record lectures. Once registered, the Office will provide you with an official letter confirming that you are entitled to academic adjustments (accommodations), which will be listed in that letter for the professor.
- Students are encouraged to give their professors this form/letter (preferably on the first day of class), but you don't have to. But keep in mind, if you don't give the professor the form, there is nothing the professor can do to help you. Also, your disability will not be identified on the form unless you specifically want it to be, and if you do want to disclose it, then you make that request in writing and submit it to the Disability Services Office.
- **When it comes to the diagnosis of IH**, you might want to print off some articles from medical journals that explain what IH is (there are helpful resources at hypersomniafoundation.org).
 - Give these articles to both the Disability Services Office and to each professor.
 - **A Personal Story ...** I once had a student who gave me a disability note on the first day of class – she has some sort of heart problem that might cause her to faint in class. OMG! I have no idea what to do if a kid faints (besides call 911), so I just asked the student, "What do I do if this happens?," and she explained to me exactly what I would need to do. This was really helpful because I have NO medical training, and I knew nothing about her condition, so it was helpful to me that the student was willing to teach me about it so I'd be prepared.

B. If Attending Live Lectures (as opposed to an online class), you might find it helpful to sit in the front of the room. It can be harder for some students with IH to drift off to sleep when they know they're right in front of the professor! If you do fall asleep in class, apologize to the professor after class; if you have told the professor about having IH, then it's a chance for you to remind the professor of this IH symptom. Your professor might have hundreds of students in a given semester, and even though you explained your IH on the first day, the professor might not immediately remember. Plus, apologies in general go a long way!

C. By Visiting Your Professor During Office Hours, it shows the professor that you care about the course and that you're willing to go out of your way to succeed.

2. What to Do in Class

A. Take Notes! Having a complete and accurate set of class notes is absolutely imperative if you want to succeed in class.

- See if your Disability Services Office will assign a peer (who also is taking the class) to take notes that you can then use to supplement your own.
- Make friends with a few people in the class, and be each other's "note-taking buddies" – each of you takes notes during class, and then after each class you swap notes. Chances are that your buddies caught things in lecture that you missed, and you can use your buddies' notes to fill in the gaps in your own notes.
- Ask your professor at the beginning of the semester if you could voice record each lecture. This is quite easy to do if you have an iPhone. If not, you might want to invest in a small voice recorder, or ask the Disability Services Office if they can lend you one. Voice recording the lecture should NOT take the place of taking notes during class! You should do both.
- **If you miss class altogether**, get the notes from one of your buddies, read them, and then go to your professor during office hours to review the notes. Professors typically won't re-do the entire lecture for you during office hours, but if you made the effort to get the notes from someone else and you have specific questions about the material, we will be more willing to help you.

B. Participate! Participating will help keep you awake. And professors LOVE it when students participate in class. When I was in college and grad school, I had a rule for myself that I had to raise my hand at least once each class session.

C. Walk Around! When you go to your professor to explain IH, ask for permission to get up and walk around in the middle of lecture. Walking around might help you stay awake. But ask permission first.

3. What to Do Outside of Class:

It's not about the number of hours you invest in a class; it's about how efficiently you use those hours. Hopefully some of the strategies and methods I suggest in the following sections will help you make your studying more efficient. Here's the advice I give to my students:

A. When It Comes to Reading

Dissecting Dense Readings: You'll find that assigned readings in college tend to be extremely dense and thus difficult to follow. Every student struggles with this.

- **Primary Sources.** I usually require that my students read the primary texts for homework. I teach ancient Greek philosophy, so these texts include Plato's dialogues and some works from Aristotle, etc. This is extremely difficult reading. None of it made any sense to me the first time I read it as an undergraduate student. With this in mind, I:

- Encourage my students to do some brief Internet searches prior to reading the primary source. So, for example, if you Google Plato's Euthyphro, you're bound to find synopses of the text and easy-to-read study guides.
- Read these first, so you have a general gist of what's going on in the dialogue, and then when you read the actual dialogue, you're more likely to understand it. Of course, online summaries should never replace primary texts; you absolutely must read the primary text!
- **Secondary Sources.** Typically, the secondary sources I assign are more accessible than the primary sources, but they're dense and difficult to read nonetheless. I tell my students to read the introductory paragraph first, and then skip down and read just the subheadings of each section of the article, and finally, read the concluding paragraph. This will give you a general sense of what the author is trying to convey in the reading as a whole. You'll get an idea of what you're supposed to walk away with after reading the article. Then, read the article word for word, but pay extra attention to details that relate to the author's main point, and just skim the excess.

Staying Awake: Staying awake while doing the assigned reading is difficult for every student, but it's *especially* difficult for those of us with IH. Here are two methods I've used for staying awake:

- **The Talking Method.** I can't tell you how many times I've reached the end of an article only to discover that I have no idea what I just read. My mind wanders... A LOT! Here's what I did to avoid this problem. I would read one paragraph – just one – and then stop, look up at the wall, and explain aloud, in my own words, what it was that I just read. I would do this for each and every paragraph of the reading. When I was in high school, my dad would drive me to orchestra practice – which was a long drive from my house. I'd read my history homework using this method, and explain each paragraph to my dad. He and I both learned quite a bit of history! You don't need another person to be present – you can talk to your dog, your cat, your wall, etc. But it's important that you explain the paragraph ALOUD – even if no one is there. That's what will keep you awake.
- **The Timer Method.** Another trick I use is to read in ten-minute chunks. Set a timer (there's probably an app for this) for ten minutes, and read for only that amount of time. At the end of the ten minutes, get up and walk around for two minutes. The physical activity will get your blood flowing and help wake you up. Then go back and read for ten, and so on.

B. When It Comes to Writing

The Problem: I absolutely hate writing papers, which is a bit of a problem given that writing papers is a huge part of my job as a professor! I've always struggled with writing, and this in turn became a vicious cycle: I knew that I struggled with writing, so I would dread the process and procrastinate, and then I'd have to write the paper at the last minute, and that just made my writing worse!

The Solutions:

- **Emailing/Texting:** Just recently, I had to write a paper for a conference, and I couldn't get the words out – I was just paralyzed. I think part of the reason was that the stakes were high. I was going to present this paper at a professional philosophy conference, and I didn't want to sound completely stupid. So I changed the stakes! Instead of starting the paper, I wrote an email to my sister explaining what I was going to write about (and told her she didn't even have to read the email!). I used casual colloquial language – I even cursed – I even used emojis! Writing an email to my sister was less intimidating for me than writing a paper, and so I was able to relax, and then the words came out more easily. Then I was ready to write the actual paper.
- **Writing by Hand:** I get burned out from writing on the computer all the time, so when I feel stuck, I take a legal pad, sit on the couch, and write by hand. For some reason, the change in medium helps me get unstuck.
- **Writing by Talking:** Another trick is to walk around your house with a voice recorder, and just talk about your ideas to the recorder. Talking about my ideas helps me figure out what I'm trying to say, and that makes it easier to start writing.
- **Using the Sprint Method:** When I was in graduate school, I had to write a dissertation over the course of two years. The problem is that it is impossible to write a several-hundred-paged dissertation the night before it's due, so you have to start early. But it's hard to get motivated to start writing something that's not due for another two years! To get through this, I teamed up with a friend of mine (who also had to write a dissertation), and we used what we called "the sprint method." (Don't worry – it has nothing to do with running.)
 - We would both sit with our computers in the same room. We'd set the timer for fifteen minutes, and as soon as the timer started, we had to start writing. We called these writing sessions "sprints" – I have no idea why.
 - For fifteen minutes, we would not allow ourselves to check our email, look at Facebook, or even go to the bathroom. And since we were in the same room, it was easy to hold each other accountable. At the end of the fifteen minutes, we'd both take a five-minute break, and do push-ups or jumping jacks, or have a spontaneous dance party to get our blood flowing and wake us up.
 - And then we'd start another fifteen-minute writing sprint. We established quotas for each other – we each had to do a total of x number of sprints a week (I can't remember the number).
 - Then we each picked a reward and a punishment. I absolutely hate cooking, so if I fell short of my weekly quota, my "punishment" was to cook an entire meal for my friend. My friend hated doing laundry, so if he fell short of his weekly goal, he'd have to do ALL of my laundry. If we

succeeded in reaching our quotas, then our reward was to go out for ice cream.

- **Varying the Sprint Method:** After a while, the sprint method stopped working, so we had to get creative. When we were writing our dissertations, there was this TV show we liked, called *Lost*, and every episode ended with a cliff-hanger. So, we would do 4 sprints, and then our reward was to watch an episode of *Lost*. Then we'd have to do 4 more sprints before we were allowed to watch the next episode. This was a killer because we were dying to know what happened next, but we wouldn't allow ourselves to watch the next episode until we'd completed another set of 4 sprints.
- **Making a Bet:** Make a bet with your friends. If you can write 5 pages in one hour, then your friends have to buy you candy (or whatever). If you fail to complete the 5 pages, then YOU have to buy your friends candy! When I was a student, I had no money, so I had a big incentive to get the 5 pages done so I didn't have to pay for my friends' candy.
- **Using Write or Die:** There's an app called "write or die" that's totally cruel – but totally effective. You start writing your paper in the app itself, but if you stop writing for x number of minutes, the app starts to erase what you just wrote. Isn't that awful? It will definitely get you to write though! Here's the website: <https://writeordie.com>.

C. When It Comes to Studying

- **Get Advice from Your Professor:** At the beginning of the semester, go to your professor during office hours, and ask him/her what the best way to study for that class is. For example, you read, write, and study for philosophy exams differently than you would for history. And since every professor teaches differently – even within the same subject – you have to figure out how to succeed in that particular professor's class. If your professor doesn't have any advice to offer, try to find a student who took the class in a previous semester, and ask the student how he/she succeeded in the class.
- **Use Discretion with Study Groups:** Study groups with your friends can be successful, but they can also be counter-productive. A few of my students had formed a study group outside of class in preparation for an upcoming exam. The problem is that none of them really understood the concepts, and none of them had a complete set of notes. As a result, they studied all of the wrong information! Ever since that happened, I've told my students to form study groups early in the semester, and develop a study guide at least one week before the exam. Then come to my office and have me look over the study guide to make sure it's factually accurate. The catch is that you have to do this well in advance of the exam – I'm not going to be in my office at midnight the night before the exam, so my students need to come to me sooner than that!
- **Figure Out How to Memorize:** I have a terrible memory, so I had to come up with some tricks to help me memorize information for class.

- **Make Connections.** Try to relate the course material to something you know from your own life experiences. Here's an example: There's an ancient Greek philosopher named Heraclitus who famously said that you can never step in the same river twice. Well, Disney stole the quote and gave it to Pocahontas in their movie. So, when I teach my students about Heraclitus, I show a brief video clip of Pocahontas singing the song about the river. My students are more likely to remember Heraclitus's quote when they can associate it with a Disney movie. It's totally silly, but it works!
- **Create Mnemonic Devices.** Come up with silly sayings to memorize important concepts. For example, "Please excuse my dear Aunt Sally" is a mnemonic device for remembering the order of operations in math. (P= parenthesis, E= exponent, M= multiplication, D= division, A= addition, S= subtraction.) Try to come up with your own mnemonic devices for memorizing concepts.
- **Sing Songs.** Research shows that humans are better at remembering words to songs than they are at remembering random words (without songs). That's why when we teach the alphabet to children, we teach them using the alphabet song. Come up with silly songs to remember concepts from class.
- **Color Code.** You're more likely to remember a concept if you associate it with a color-coded visual representation. I tell my students to buy colored markers for college, and use them to make charts and study guides. For example, in my class we compare Buddhist philosophy to Plato's philosophy. Sometimes, students get confused as to which one said what. So I tell them to make a color-coded chart. Use a blue marker for Buddhism (because both start with 'b') and a pink one for Plato (since both start with 'p'). All the ideas that Plato believed are in pink in one column of the paper and everything Buddhists think is in blue on the opposite column.
- **Post Flash Cards Everywhere.** I had to learn to read the ancient Greek language when I was in graduate school, and not only is ancient Greek really friggin hard, it is also all about memorization. Yikes! I can't sit down for an hour and look at a vocab list and memorize it (though some people can!). I had to look at the list constantly throughout the day in order for the words to sink into my memory. So I made flash cards of vocab words and posted them all over my apartment – on the ceiling above my bed, on the toilet paper roll in the bathroom, on the refrigerator door – you name it – my apartment was covered in flash cards. It really helped me memorize the vocab words!

THE BOTTOM LINE

- **Know Thyself:** I had a friend named George in graduate school, who would go to the library on a Friday night and read philosophy "for fun." He always talked about

philosophy, and writing philosophy papers came easily to him. To be honest, I kind of hated him for it! I was just jealous – graduate school was extremely challenging for me, and by Friday night the last thing I'd want to do is read more philosophy. I tried sitting in the library and pretending I was George, but I'd just fall asleep. I had to come to grips with the fact that I am not George; I am basically a five-year-old with a short attention span AND a sleep disorder to boot. I needed to figure out how to trick myself into doing philosophy by using incentives like candy. Once I accepted this, I was able to work with it.

- **It Does Take a Village:** I could not have gotten where I am today if I had tried to do it alone. From teaching history to my dad, to doing sprints with my dissertation-writing friend, I really relied on other people to help me. When I started graduate school, my writing skills were terrible. So I'd make these decadent over-the-top chocolate desserts and use them to bribe my philosophy friends to edit my papers. My undergraduate institution offered free tutoring in math and science. I never actually needed a tutor, but I always went to them for help anyway. It was just easier to stay awake if I worked through a math problem with a tutor than if I tried to tackle it on my own, alone in my dorm room. There's absolutely nothing wrong with using your resources and leaning on others!

I hope this helps you!

**Approved by Hypersomnia Foundation Board of Directors
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