

Learning to Learn at MIT

It was the end of my first semester at MIT; well, almost the end. There was one obstacle left: finals.

More specifically, there were three: 8.01, 3.091, and 18.01. Although the first semester at MIT was pass

or no record, I was in real danger of failing. I thought I had learned the material, but I was not able to

solve the problems on the test. I barely passed most of them. Now in order to pass the class, I would

need to step it up and give it my all. Failing was not an option. There was no way that I would want to

repeat a class – that would put me way behind; I would lose a semester of time here at MIT. I knew I

had to pass. There was a week left before finals; I needed to learn how to learn at MIT.

*Pronoun -
antecedent
agreement*

*good introductory
Paragraph*

I did not really like the classes my first semester; I saw them as a necessary evil of attending MIT.

I was not good at math or problem solving in physics. I did not see myself getting an engineering

degree. I loved my UROP and all of the other experiences of MIT. I learned a great deal from those

experiences and grew personally. However, in order to graduate, I needed to complete the GIRs. I

always thought that they would be the hardest part of the experience. Once I got through them and

started taking classes in my major it would be better.

I worked hard in elementary and middle schools, but high school started off too easy for me. I

coasted through math class without really learning the material. The assessments did not really force

me to learn; I only had to memorize the process. This put me at a disadvantage at MIT; my old methods

of learning, or appearing to learn, did not really work. In addition, in high school, just putting the time in

to do the reading and take notes, put me at an advantage. This was not true at MIT. In addition, I

budgeted time for work to be completed. I cut corners to get it done in the time that I thought I should

spend on it. I realize now that this would not work; I have to spend however long it takes to learn the

material.

*I realized it would not work.
I realize it will not work.*

Altering sentence structure a bit more will give you piece more fluency.

or Beginning with 18.01, I went through every test and redid every problem.

I started to study the week before finals. I started on 18.01 by going through every test, and redoing each problem. I did not have access to a blank copy of the test, so I covered up the test and worked on a blank sheet of paper. In high school, I would sometimes just read through the answer key to study. At MIT this strategy was not effective. As I was reading the answer key, I thought that the answer to a particular type of problem sounded obvious and that I knew it. However, when the test came, I could not remember how to solve such problems. I had to not kid myself; I had to actually try the problems while studying. But as I was redoing the 18.01 tests, I became very worried because I forgot at least one step in 40% of the problems, and had no clue about another 30% of the problems. For these, I had to peek at the answer key and to reconstruct how to solve the problem. This was helpful for me as long as I went *slowly* and actually tried to learn the solutions.

After classes ended on Thursday, it was time to get serious about studying for finals. I had to find the best place to study. My room is not a good place to do work. My computer fills my entire desk space, so there is nowhere to work on paper. In addition, my roommates are often there and I cannot get anything done when there are other people around. Luckily, MIT has lots of little areas ^{for students} to study. My dorm, Baker House, has a row of tables down the hall from my room. This is where I did a lot of my math p-sets during the semester. This was moderately successful. If I forgot something, I had easy access to my room. The area was somewhat isolated, but it was in the hallway, so people were always passing. Other students find a classroom to work in. I always seem to have bad luck, as someone always interrupts me because there is a class scheduled in there. However, the Media Lab recently moved to a new building, E14. The old building, E15, was now mostly vacant. I decided to check out my old lab. There was an old office, E15-493, which was cleaned out and unlocked. It had a door I could close to be completely alone. I could just sit there and hours would go by without anyone bothering me.

nice description

I was also not distracted by my laptop. In high school and during the semester this was always a problem for me; I would always think of something unrelated to what I was doing and then I would look it up. Or I would be bored and I would open MSNBC.com to read something. But by far the largest impediment to studying was that when I ran into difficulty with a problem; I would not struggle with the problem and focus; I would turn away from it to read something on the web. This was very bad for me. The pressure of needing to pass limited my web surfing, especially as the finals got closer.

The upcoming finals also meant that I had nothing scheduled that weekend. One of my problems during the semester was that scheduled ^{review?} sessions took up a lot of time, up to double the length of the session. It takes time to travel there and back, which does not feel like much, but can be up to 15 minutes each direction. Plus, I have to arrange my schedule around it. If I had less than an hour of time, then I would not get started working. By the time I would have been set up, it would be time to go. I struggled with this during the semester; was it worth it to set everything up to work for a few minutes? In addition, it is hard to get started working. **Once you get over the hump and start, you just continue working. Distractions do take up some time, but you tend to continue working after 5 minutes. Then you lose your focus.**

this point isn't entirely clear.

I spent the weekend studying in E15-493. I got up around 10, walked to the Media Lab and studied all day. I only left to walk around the lab for a stretch break about every hour. Around dinnertime, I ran back to Baker to buy dinner, and then ran back to E15 to study. I stayed most nights until 2AM. I was exhausted when I walked through the desolate and cold night back to Baker to sleep.

I was very nervous on Monday when my 8.01 final finally arrived. I was unsure about a lot of the problems. But when I talked to others afterward, who seemed far more prepared than I was, they said that they had trouble as well. This made me feel somewhat better. I wrote in my journal immediately after the final that I probably did better than I thought I did at the time.

After 8.01 there was not much time to rest. My 3.091 final was the next day. I only had about 20 hours to study for it, so that made studying that night very intense. I thought it was going to be the easiest, however, the final ended up being more difficult than I expected that I thought it was going to be. I think I also made a mistake in what I was studying. Professor Sadoway told us to read the textbook; however, that material was not really relevant. I should have focused on simply studying the material from the lectures.

After 3.091, I had two days to study for 18.01. In total, I wrote about 100 pages for 18.01, redoing problems over and over again until I was out of time. I do not remember much from this final since I went home later that day as soon as the final was over. I was glad to be done with the first semester of MIT; I just hoped that I did well enough in each class to pass.

At home, I kept refreshing WebSIS to see if the grades were posted. One by one they came online. I got a C in 3.091 and 18.01 and a B- in 8.01. I was very happy that I did it; I passed everything, I could move ahead to the next semester.

There is so much going on at MIT that I cannot really keep up from week to week. I need to take what I learned from this experience and apply it to the entire semester. I must try not to slip behind, or do work just to get it done. I need to be up for each class, fully awake and prepared. There are only 30 classes in a typical course, each is important. Paying attention in class will save hours of studying or being frustrated on a P-set. Also, I need to spend the single hours between classes doing something productive. Overall, I need to be prepared to invest the time, however long it takes to understand a concept, while trying to not fall behind.

I am proud of those two weeks I spent studying. I was able to pull everything together and pass the classes. It was where I learned to focus, to study, to do the work I needed to in order to pass. I am now one week into the second semester and focusing on and studying the hard material feels better. It

This is a "comma splice" - combining two sentences with a comma. Do you see the problem?

now feels that I can master anything if I dedicate myself to it. If I spend all my time on something, and ignore external influences, like the flow of time, I can master whatever MIT throws at me. I no longer dread it. It feels fun to learn something complicated that I did not know before. I now feel like an engineering major might not only be doable, but fun. Perhaps some of this will wear out as the second semester continues, or maybe I will actually enjoy the math and physics classes now, since I will not be struggling as much.

Michael,

You've addressed the main weaknesses that I emphasized in the first version. The essay has a very clear point and it's well structured. You've done a good job of weaving together the chronological account of your experience studying for those finals with your reflections on that experience. It's an insightful personal narrative.

I've noted some awkward (actually, it's more a case of repetitive structure) phrasing. Nonetheless, your prose is generally clear. I've also pointed out a few mechanical errors.

Overall, this is a good revision.

A-