



How you gain independence and control (You might be surprised.)

When you look ahead to your future, what is it that you want? To be yourself and to determine your own future — a future that might include a career, success, and personal happiness. You can achieve such things only if you have control over your own life. But what gets in the way? Your education! Or at least it seems like it. You may feel that you're never in control of yourself at school. You have teachers telling you what to do. Parents telling you. Counselors telling you. Where's the independence or control in that? It's there. You just have to be able to see it. Read on!

The truth is that you don't just suddenly become *in control and independent*. Rather, as you grow in intelligence and maturity, life gives you ways to practice these skills and get better at using them. The key word here is *practice*. You must practice these skills to master them. Where do you get the chance? At school! Your education gives you dozens of opportunities to juggle responsibilities — to practice being independent, in control, and productive. Don't believe it? Think about it this way:

- In high school, your teachers decide what you must learn in a class, *but you control how and when to fit learning into your days*.
- Your high school tells you that you need certain requirements to graduate, *but you have to figure out how to manage and succeed in all those courses every day*.

- Your school insists that you take a variety of courses, *but you have to find ways to train your mind to do different kinds of thinking and learning to succeed in courses that can be very different from each other.*

You say these examples don't make you free enough? How free do you want to be? Free like your parents? Good. Let's see how free they are.

About adult freedom

When you were very young, you always thought that your parents were totally free and in control of their lives. But don't they, too, have bosses, work schedules, deadlines, projects, and assignments at work? (Doesn't that sound like school?) If you take managing your independence seriously, the kinds of decisions you make every day in school will prepare you to gradually enter and succeed in adulthood. What you should now understand is a more real definition of freedom: **finding new ways to meet challenges within the boundaries that life gives you.**

So after the midpoint of your educational life (middle school), you're the one in charge. Your future will be the result of your decisions. No more hand holding. From now on, more and more of the decisions are entirely up to you, and they're decisions that can't be ignored. The right choices help you move ahead with your life. You're the one who decides what kind of student you will be, and why. As you move through each phase of your education, you'll have to take ownership and say, "*They were MY decisions, good and bad.*"

What grades mean to your freedom and your future

You know the record of your grades in the school office? (This record is called a *transcript*.) I want you think of it as your savings account. What do you do with your savings account? If you're smart, you work to earn money, and then you deposit the money in your savings account. When you need money to buy something, the money is there for you. You spend carefully. You also continue to save for the future.

What happens if you don't work very hard and earn very much? When you want to buy something, you can't. You don't have enough money.

It's the same with the grades on your school record, your transcript. Really great grades give you power and help you buy what you need. **Are your grades really like money? Yes, you use your grades to purchase your future.** Remember the question that your family members always ask you: "*How are you doing in school?*" That question changes as you get older and as you move closer to college, your hoped-for career, and your adulthood. The question becomes "*How DID you do in school?*" And it's asked by a stranger who can alter your life: college admissions counselor, college financial-aid officer, or, later on, potential employer.

By looking at your transcript, these people will determine whether you may move from here to there, from this level to that — from high school to certain colleges, from college to a job or more schooling. And with electronic information, the transcript of each stage of your education will be readily available to the people who need to review it.

Your transcript tells these people quite a lot about you. If your transcript shows high grades in all your courses, the evaluator will conclude that you are a steady, serious student. Therefore, your transcript can earn you a seat in the freshman class of your favorite college. If your grades are up and down and all over the place, your “academic savings account” won’t have enough money to earn you the college or job that you want. If your grades are high only in easy courses but fall in harder courses, the evaluator will recognize that you don’t work as a student. And that brings up another point about academic savings accounts.

Not all grades are equal in the eyes of a reviewer. Reviewers don’t look just at your grade point average. They look at individual grades. Did you earn that *A* in Physical Education or Physics? If you take courses that prepare you for college and that are challenging, an excellent grade becomes all the more impressive. It’s good as gold. If you are taking really easy courses (just earning enough credits to graduate), your transcript is less impressive. Yes, you may have more *As*, but if you’ve earned them in less-demanding courses, they are “worth” less in the eyes of the reviewer. They “buy” less of a future for you.

Here’s the point: Students often think grades are relevant only in the present, or maybe the near future. Not so. Reviewers are frequently looking at your academic record. Inconsistent grades tell reviewers about lapses in knowledge, initiative, dedication, responsibility, or mental agility. These are the things that colleges, professional schools (law, business, dentistry, medicine, etc.), and conscientious employers look for. “Average” grades in “average courses” damage your academic advancement, causing your future success to fade and, in some cases, disappear altogether.

When you work hard to get the best possible grades in all your courses (not just the ones you like or the easy ones), it means you are looking seriously at your future, perhaps for the first time. That makes some students a little bit nervous. Right now, as a student looking at your future, what do you see? Anything? Everything? Are you starting to see connections between academic success and future success? Read on!

Information, not grades

But here’s an idea that might surprise you. Knowledge and learning are more important than grades. It’s true. Grades are only supposed to signal *that* you’ve learned — that the information you’ve read in books and studied in class is now in your head.

Yet grades don’t always mean that. For many students, grades represent only superficial learning and temporary knowledge. How can that be? It happens this way: Students cram for a unit test, they get a good grade, and then they move on to the next unit. They cram for the next unit test and all the others that follow. Why are they cramming? Because they didn’t make time to study the material every day and really absorb it. It’s all connected to time and how you use it each day.

Cramming is dangerous because it fails to create long-term knowledge (and fails to develop the learning skills you need for college). Six weeks after students finish the unit, the information they crammed right before the test evaporates. It’s gone for good.

A few years later, in college, for example, a professor expects students to have a solid background in a foreign language course because of students' high school background in the language. But the knowledge isn't in their heads anymore. Crammers have no foundation to build on. They've forgotten it. As college students, they find themselves lost and scrambling in the early days of the course. College courses move quickly. As the weeks go by, students find their situation gets worse and worse — and leads to disastrous results with far-reaching consequences. Remember: Huge numbers of college freshmen don't return to campus. Huge numbers of college students can't graduate on time. **They didn't know that mapping out and managing their high school days would affect them for THE REST OF THEIR LIVES.**

The rest of this book will show you how to become a student who never has to face this problem. Oh, and by the way, one more *really important* thing you should know about grades: If you learn to study well in all your courses, you never have to worry about good grades. Once you've nailed the material, great grades can't help but follow. **Learn the material, and grades take care of themselves.**

PSST!

PSST! You want independence, and this chapter tells you that you have plenty of opportunity to take charge. Review the highlights. How you map out your days and use your time will help you build your future. You have the freedom to make these decisions!