

Biegelson's Theory of Small Pieces: A Study Guide for the Undisciplined

By Jay Biegelson, Guidance Department,
Stuyvesant High School

If you have been unsuccessful so far in achieving the grades you feel you are capable of, this guide may help you structure your time and maximize results from efforts spent on your studies. Jay Biegelson's *Theory of Small Pieces* was designed to make your daily approach to studying a more palatable experience and to encourage your involvement in the learning process.

Your success can be achieved through small efforts made on a daily basis throughout the term. People do not fail because they can not do, they fail because they fall behind and then spend the marking period playing "catch up".

Daily Review

A daily review of class notes is essential for success in high school. Five minutes of review in each of your subjects done in the following manner is all that's needed:

(small pieces)

1. Set up a study folder for each class, independent of your notebook and your homework.
2. Look through your class notes each day and ask yourself, "What are the four or five important ideas from this lesson?" They may consist of a set of formulas, equations, definitions, translations, dates and events, etc.
3. Write them down on a separate sheet of paper, and date it. (Do not just highlight them in your notes.)
4. Then ask yourself the really important question, "Do I understand this material?"
5. Imagine another student was absent, and called you for the work, could you teach them these five things? If you feel that you can explain all the issues to someone else, you're done.
6. Place the sheet in your folder.
7. If you're not sure about any one of the items, make a note to yourself in your notebook heading.
8. Ask your teacher, the following day, for further clarification on the subject.

Form a Study Group

Do not feel embarrassed to seek help.

If you are not clear on an issue, I guarantee you that there are five or six others in your class who are equally lost.

If you continue to have difficulty in a subject or if you want to excel in a subject, announce to your class that you are forming a study group, and set a meeting time for after class.

You don't need to meet everyday, maybe just once or twice a week.

Four people observing the same lesson will get four different interpretations of what was taught.

There will be things that you can teach others, and subjects that they can help you with.

Work as a team, and share your knowledge.

Note-taking Ideas

If you feel that your note taking ability leaves something to be desired, you might try giving a sheet of carbon paper to another student in the class, and incorporate both sets of notes when drawing up your study guide each night.

When given a reading assignment skim through the book looking for a summary at the beginning or the end of the chapter and/or any italicized words, bold print or chapter sub-headings the author may have included.

Read these first, then read the chapter. It will give your mind a framework for processing the information. The material will make more sense to you if you know what is to come in the chapter.

When finished, write your own summary.

Ask yourself, "What are the ten or fifteen important facts in this chapter? What would you quiz your students on if you were the teacher?"

Place this summary in your folder.

Study Tips

The day an exam is announced, take out your folder.

You'll find that you have an outline of two or three weeks worth of class notes and three or four reading assignments. You have your study guide! You've been doing it by working five minutes each day (small pieces).

You are usually given about a week's notice for an upcoming test. Spend a half-hour reviewing these notes. Six half-hour sessions over a week is a lot more effective than a single three-hour "cram" session the night before the exam. The same amount of time is spent, only more efficiently.

Most important, you will become aware, on the first night, a week before the test, of what you know and don't know.

You'll have time to ask your friends, teacher, study group or your tutor about those issues. You won't spend a week procrastinating and worrying about how you are going to conquer this mountain of material. You also won't wind up studying the wrong material the night before the exam, and walking into the test in a state of panic.

You'll begin to feel comfortable with the material by the third or fourth day. The last two days will be your fine-tuning for the test.

Flash Cards for Review

Flash cards are an effective means of review and can help you quickly memorize long lists of data during your half-hour review sessions.

The flash card employs "white space" as a tool to learning. "White space" refers to all the blank areas on the card. It is a basic concept of the advertising industry. The eye can focus on one word, one idea, one concept, a lot more effectively than an entire list of facts running down a page.

The second key to efficient flash card use is the removal of learned material.

You should go through your pack of cards once and discard any facts that you know.

Place them in a separate pile. You don't need to review material already memorized.

Go through the remaining pile again and again, each time removing the three or four items that you have retained.

When you have moved all the cards to the discard pile go over those cards again and review only the forgotten material until you have it down pat.

Homework: the Freedom & Worst Subject approach

Homework should be approached in small pieces also.

One hour periods of intense work followed by half hour breaks are more efficient than long periods of work filled with distraction, boredom or the discomfort of sitting for a long stretch.

The only time you should be working for three or four hours in a row is when you're writing a term paper and need to generate a series of thoughts and ideas.

Homework periods should be approached on a "worst subject" basis. Start with your most difficult class and work towards your easiest.

You don't want to sit down to your hardest subject after three or four hours of work; you're just too tired and drained. Yet you could handle your strong subjects even after a long day of work.

Try to establish a regular schedule for homework and study. All other activities should be fit into and around that schedule.

A typical Monday through Thursday schedule might look as follows:

- Spend a half-hour with your friends after school unwinding and socializing.
- When you arrive home sit down for a one-hour period of homework.
- Set the clock.
- One hour is easy enough to digest even for the greatest of procrastinators.
- Take a break, have dinner, watch some TV, call a friend.
- Spend at least a half-hour away from your work.
- Then sit down for a second one-hour shift, followed by another half-hour break.
- Tape your favorite shows and use the break time to view them.
- Tell your parents to take all phone calls that come in during your one-hour homework periods, or use your message machine, and call them back during your free time. Your friends will soon learn your schedule and call at the right time.
- Sit down for a third hour if necessary and follow that with a break.
- Do your five-minute write-ups for each of your classes.
- Remember to make note of those questions you have for tomorrow.
- If a test has been announced do your half-hour review and you're done.
- If you arrive home at 4:30 you'll be done by 9:30 or 10:00 and have dedicated three solid hours to your homework, a review of class notes and prepared for a test.
- You've also allowed time for your friends, your family and yourself.
- On Friday join a club or team and spend the afternoon at school.
- You're free Friday night. Have fun!
- You're free Saturday night.
- You're free Sunday night.
- You can't do homework or study on Sunday night.
- If you eliminate Sunday evening study, you'll begin to break the cycle of procrastination that has brought you to read this article.

- Since you were free all Friday afternoon and evening, you need to dedicate some time, of your choice; Saturday morning or afternoon, Sunday morning or afternoon to the routine set up earlier.
- An hour of work, half hour break, hour of work, half hour break, five minute write-ups, half hour study blocks etc.

Your Agenda/Planner

Keep an agenda/planner of when things are due.
Don't just write down -Dec.15/Term Paper Due-.

Break it into small pieces.

Assign yourself a set of dates;

- to do research,
- to work on your rough outline,
- to write the rough draft,
- the final draft,
- to do your typing.

If you wait for the last two weekends to work on your paper I guarantee you that two other teachers will tell you about a major exam on the same day your paper is due, and you'll be jammed up in all three.

The key to success is to stay ahead of the game. Doing your work in small pieces allows you mastery of your schoolwork and your free time.

Take control of your life.