



Getting A's in math has a lot to do with strategy.

It might be odd to think of math in the same context as pro sports, but the reality is that they share a similar path to success.

While getting A's might not hold the same clout as winning a championship, it's pretty much the equivalent of winning at college.

And Michael Jordan always played to win — whether in a real game or for practice.

He had a plan that would help him little by little make the hard things easy. You can do the same.

Here are some down-to-earth tips from a top college professor* on how to conquer your college math class.

How to Set Yourself Up for Getting A's in Math

1. Practice Like a Pro

There were some days that Michael Jordan spent a couple of hours on the court, and others when he was there from sunrise to sunset. But it wasn't just about time that mattered. It was *how* he spent those hours.

Jordan kept track of techniques that he wasn't yet good at. Rather than reviewing the things he had already mastered (or getting distracted by something happening on the sidelines), he would hone in on his weaknesses.

Let's take a look at how this applies to math homework.

First, you have to know what you're not yet good at, and looking over your notes won't cut it. Instead, keep track of problems you miss as you do your homework or on tests. Notice which problems include a step that isn't completely clear.

For you, this means being honest with yourself about the tough stuff. Create a running list and title it *Hard Problems*. Any problems, theorems, or formulas that don't make sense should go on the *Hard Problems* list. Solve these problems the next day, and if they're still unclear solve them again the day after. Practice in this way until you can complete each problem without looking at your book or your notes.

Remember to ask for help if things just aren't clicking for you. Practicing the right thing the wrong way is just as bad as practicing the wrong thing.

2. Dedicate Time

As you probably know by now, college math requires some serious left brain power. This means that no matter how skilled you are, it will require a significant amount of time. One student said that her biggest regret was that she failed to dedicate enough time for her math class. She did her homework and then stopped. Her thinking was, “Hey, I did the assignment!” As midterms came around, though, she felt stressed and exhausted because the studying had piled up.

Getting A’s means giving your brain time to grasp these concepts. That means not only homework time and practice time (see #1), but also time for the concepts to consolidate. That, interestingly enough, means **downtime**.

Between math study, your brain needs a break. Spend an afternoon at the beach and get a good night’s sleep. It’s when your brain shifts back and forth from a narrow “study” focus to a broader “kick back” focus that concepts start to consolidate. And it’s when you sleep that the deeper neural pathways develop.

That’s why college math classes are impossible to ace through cramming. You have to show up.

3. Balance the Load

Back to Michael Jordan.

He planned his workouts. He had leg day, arm day, back day, shrug muscle day. (I’m not even sure what shrug muscles are, but he worked them out anyway.)

Each workout was focused on one part of his body rather than him attempting to strengthen his entire body in one long workout.

You can do something similar with your schedule. For example, you can plan to work on a specific section your Hard Problems list so that you can master a particular concept.

A weekly and monthly calendar will also help you balance math practice with your other classes. If you make a plan and stick with it, you’ll be kicking back during finals week while other students are pulling 12 hour study days.

Turn Your Weakness Into a Strength

If you’re like **most of the students I work with**, implementing these expert math class tips will make getting A’s very doable. It will not only change the way you think about math, but also the way you think about tackling hard problems — in college and in any part of your life.



As Michael Jordan said,

“If you push me towards something that you think is my weakness, I will turn that perceived weakness into a strength.”

** You can read the complete version of Dr. Jessica Purcell’s notes on “How to Get an A in Calculus.” She wrote these notes when she was teaching at Stanford University.*