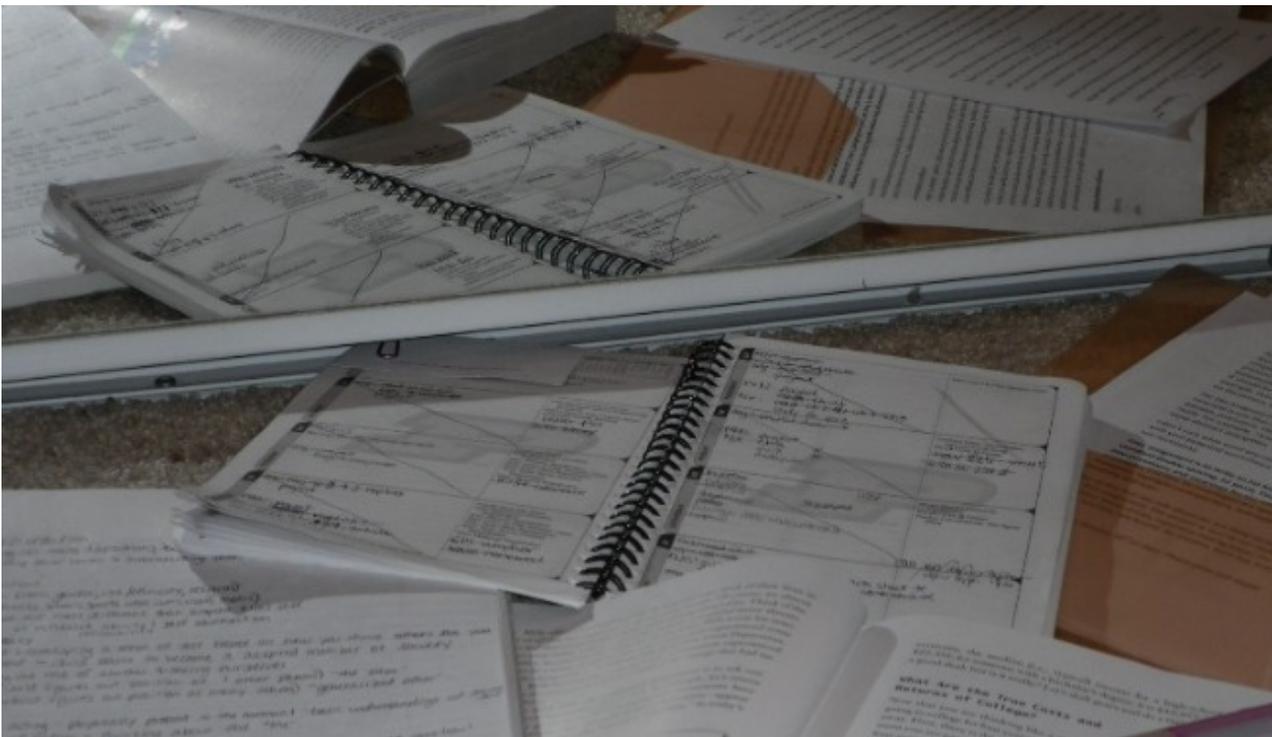




My Insane Homework Load Taught Me How to Game the System

By Elif Koc



English106/Flickr

A year and a half ago, I was fully immersed in the routine of being a high-school junior. On an average night, my Internet tabs looked something like this: page 2 of a desperate Google search on “Differential equations easy examples,” a vocabulary list on Quizlet.com, a couple Wikipedia articles, my school newspaper, email, Twitter, a YouTube video, and a Yahoo! Answers session called “What is the easiest SAT subject test if you are bad at math?”

I would operate these worlds simultaneously, studying for biology exams amidst vocab review, responding to emails from my school’s newspaper editors while working on research papers. I would study and do my homework in a frenzied focus, switching from subject to subject in an attempt to maximize my efficiency.

These were my weeknights from 7 p.m. to 1 a.m. I attended a private college-preparatory high school in

Seattle, where I was involved in cross-country, debate, the school newspaper, and mock trial. I studied for the SATs. I tutored a middle school student twice a week. I worked hard, I loved school, and I was always stressed.

I felt a lot of pressure to get good grades. In a college application process awash with 4.0's and 2400's, a 3.75 is not an accomplishment, I understood, but a setback. College counselors will tell you that universities like "upward trends" and "heavy course loads," and while this is true, it's the kids who take the hardest classes and still get straight A's who are the crème of the crop.

Even though I understood this reality from my very first day of freshman year, my grades in high school were not the greatest. I took challenging classes, and I got some B's. Especially early on, I was more concerned with learning thoroughly than I was with getting good grades.

Junior year is the most difficult year of high school, and with college brochures and PSAT results flooding my doorstep and e-mail inbox, I became increasingly aware of the role that my current grades would play in my near future.

Doing all of my homework no longer felt realistic. My friends and I realized we didn't have to do everything assigned to us in order to succeed in high school. We found shortcuts and we minimized our efforts in order to get the grades we wanted. The middle school "memorization not rationalization" mindset that Karl Taro Greenfield describes in his [recent Atlantic essay](#) turns into a more insidious "How can I do as little as possible and still get an A?" mentality.

Here's an example. Math homework at my school is often graded on completion. Therefore, "Read section 3.4 and do problems 1-15" ideally means reading the entire section, adding notes to your composition book, and working through all the problems to the best of your ability. But it can also mean spending 20 minutes working through the relatively easy problems and filling in the rest during the next class session where we'd review all the material.

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Smart, charismatic kids could go into English class without doing the previous night's reading, listen to the class discussion for a few minutes, and then join in with ease.

We were maximizing our academic success while minimizing our effort in certain subjects. We

The Homework Wars



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understood our teachers' expectations and aimed to meet them, not to exceed them. There is a difference between being a good learner and a good student, and in high school, my peers and I learned how to be good students.

Maybe that's not a bad thing. Maybe the point of high school *is* to create good students. A few weeks ago, I started my freshman year at New York University. I can write a standard research paper; I can take thorough notes during a lecture. I can maximize my homework efficiency, so I don't linger on my assignments the way I would as a freshman in high school.

High school throws a lot of information your way that you aren't going to remember. I took seven classes a day, most of which were picked by state and federal education requirements. It's a system; work hard, distribute your time wisely, and get good grades. Then, when you go to college, you can start narrowing in on those subjects you like the most.

Today, my Internet tabs are a lot more toned down. They look something like this: my email, the NYU homepage, and my online banking statement.

Maybe the objective of high school is to become a good student. I hope college is where I can become a good learner.

This article available online at:

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