A Guide to HSC Success

Tips from 5 really successful students

Burwood GHS
Year 12, 2013
Tips for Achieving Success in the HSC.

1. Set a goal.

Everyone’s idea of success varies so don’t heavily compare your idea of success to someone else’s idea of success. Everyone has differing standards and expectations. Set a goal that embodies YOUR idea of success (e.g. a specific ATAR, dream course or even just getting through the HSC) and place it somewhere you can visibly see everyday. Let this be a motivating factor that acts as a reminder of what you want to achieve by the end of this year.

2. Consistency.

A cake mix must be mixed thoroughly with all the ingredients required in order for it to rise in the oven. This is the same for you, try your best not to be behind on homework and study but at the same time, don’t overwork yourself to the point of being burnt. Every day, set some time to ensure you’re up to date with all your work and you revise over what you learnt. This will help you greatly when revising for your exams.

**Major Works:** Allocate time to work on your major works and DON’T leave them til last minute. I changed my whole visual arts major work 4 days prior to 75% of it being due and the stress and lack of sleep was not particularly worth it. As much as there is a need to research, ensure that you’re not on a research marathon, but rather actually start your PIPS for extension subjects like history earlier. It is better to start writing drafts and plans whilst simultaneously researching rather than be left with an information overload and ZERO words written.

3. Time.

Time flew by the quickest in Year 12 for me. Make sure you find out what works in scheduling and organising your time. If you’re a timetable person, schedule times for study, breaks as well as extra curricular activities and commitments. Personally, timetables did not work for me. I aimed to study and complete my work for 3 hours every night but with the differing nature of each day, I made sure that if I had to attend an event, then I would spend whatever time I had before, completing my homework and all necessary tasks. An approach I found more effective to get tasks done rather than spend 3 hours on something I could complete in 1 hour. Experiment with different ways – either through a ‘to do list’, timetabling or having someone to keep you accountable and see which one works best for you – and do it early!


Aim to maintain extra-curricular activities or commitments and sports unless you feel it is necessary to quit. They can be things that motivate you and allow you to take your mind off study, or give you a broader perspective beyond the scope of year 12.

I worked for the first half of year 12 at a local newsagency, had to fulfil my school captain duties and attend regular meetings and events whilst aiming to attend church weekly where I served in music. These were time-consuming activities but they kept me partially sane and were great in allowing me to de-stress and give me a larger perspective on life. It also kept me busy which was a positive factor for me as I find that often when you’re not studying, you’re either thinking about how you should be studying or you’re scrolling through your Facebook newsfeed which is full of depressing statuses and images of how oh so demanding year 12 is and how lyf sux.

5. Perspective.

Have a broader perspective and understand that the HSC isn’t the decider of your future. A swagalicious J. Alvarado once said “Your awesomeness is determined by the type of person you are and the way you treat others, not by some exam results you achieve as a 17/18 year old. You will either celebrate or be disappointed, but you are still the same person. Life will go on.”

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**Name:** Rebecca Yan  
**Subjects:** English (Advanced), Mathematics, Legal Studies, Modern History, Visual Arts, Ext History  
**Studying:** Combined Law/Commerce at USYD (AND with a scholarship!)  
**The best bit:** 96/100 in HSC English (top BGHS mark) which is the top 1% of the state; 97/100 in Legal Studies (equal top BGHS mark) which placed her in the top 33 students in the state out of more than 10,000 students.
Do the best you can and if you’ve tried your best, then, no regrets! There are endless pathways and opportunities in life. You are not defined by a 4-digit number. You are far more than that. After trials, I found out that one of my family members had cancer. It wasn’t something I wanted to hear and at a time when HSC exams were close. However, through this experience I gained a much bigger perspective on life and it really made the HSC look weak. As for you, there will be times where you encounter bad experiences, loss of loved ones and evil illnesses. But, don’t give up and remember that there is a support network both in and out of school; there are people who will give you advice, support and motivation. Look after yourself and talk to your close friends and teachers about it. You’ll get through it. 😊

6. Competition

It seems like even the people who slacked off for the past 5 years start to pick up their game. ;) In the midst of fighting for ranks and top assessment marks, you should not constantly compare your marks to others. Rather, you should compare them to what you achieved last time and aim to improve your personal best. Sure, knowing what others achieved can be a motivating factor to do well but competition can be the root of broken friendships. Aim to help one another for difficult concepts and form study partners or accountability checks. At the end of the day, you’re competing as a school and how your cohort does is a very important factor. If you all do well, it’ll push your assessment mark higher, so it’s win-win.

This was particularly helpful during the post trial period. Once all the rank shenanigans and internal assessments were done, we formed facebook groups and a lot of the top students shared their notes, resources, practice essay questions and problems to solve.


This applies to every subject. Practice writing essays under exam conditions, practice writing a bit more legibly (clearly I did not), practice all those math problems you can’t do (pls do it). Doing this will pay off in the long run. Don’t ceeb

8. Be Happy now.

Don’t think that after you get a great mark, you will be happy then. Once you reach that point, you’ll be repeating that statement for getting into your desired and then you’ll repeat it when you get into uni and say you’ll be happy when you graduate and so forth. Year 12 was one of the best years in high school and could arguably be the best for a lot of people. Enjoy being at the top of the year hierarchy, having free periods; enjoy the jerseys and the close relationships you form with your friends and teachers. It is not until when you leave high school, you really realise how it wasn’t so bad and it was actually pretty awesome. Even though you can’t wait to get out of it, enjoy being in the moment. It’s the last year you and your friends get to see each other 5 days in a row!

Make the most of it.

Don’t wait to be happy. Be happy NOW.

Keep going and Good Luck! May the force be with you.

Rebecca Yan

P.s. Feel free to talk to me about Year 12/advice/stress/uni courses/post hsc lyf on Facebook or email me at rebecca.yan@hotmail.com 😊
**Assessments:** For written assessments (as hard and cliché as it sounds) I tried to make sure I started straight away and finished as early as possible. For me this was the best way to simultaneously avoid stress and proof read my work as many times as necessary which was incredibly beneficial.

**Notes:** In making my notes, especially when it came to content dense subjects like Legal, it was paramount that my notes were succinct and stuck religiously to the syllabus. Tip: Try not to write 50 pages like I did for my first set of history notes - you’ll end up scrapping them for a much more manageable 20 pages later!

**Study/ Memorising:** On top of mindlessly typing notes, copying passages from textbooks and highlighting (which in the end [surprisingly enough] didn’t really help a whole lot) I would recommend:

- If you commute to school or to extra curricular and social activities utilise your transport time to study. One of the main reasons I was able to juggle everything in the year is definitely owed to this. For example, in my hour plus travel to school I could either read some of a prescribed English book, memorise palm cards for Legal or History, listen to a lecture on postmodernism for History Ext, think of short story ideas or use some of the educational apps I had downloaded on my phone.
- Palmcards (especially for Legal legislation and history dates)! I don’t know how much I can express my gratitude for palmcards, they are a saviour.
- Educational apps: If you have not already checked it out (without trying to sound promotional) I would highly recommend the HSC Legal studies app (sidenote- also like their facebook page; then you can study whilst you procrastinate). There are also plenty of apps out there for most subjects, although the aforementioned was the only one I really used.
- Talking out your thoughts and notes is a good way of understanding and cementing course content. No matter how loopy you feel when you start explaining the Schlieffen Plan or charge negotiations to your cat or your mirror (and if you can’t rope someone in to listening to you rattle on for hours) I would highly recommend it!
- Practice, practice, practice essay writing and get it marked with feedback. If you don’t understand the feedback a teacher is giving, ask them about it. It is the only way your writing will improve

**Trials....** They certainly do creep up on you. No matter how much everyone tells you this I would certainly emphasise that you make sure everything is sorted by Trials to avoid unnecessary freakouts. As soon as you get the date start planning out your time. So many of my friends (especially the ones with major works like myself) had massive freakouts during Trials and you don’t know how much you will be thanking yourself when you’ve learnt your notes and your major works are handed in early because you prepared a week early.

**The HSC:** It’s crucial that you don’t run out of steam in the lead up to the HSC. Although this period is mostly study, as with the rest of the year I wouldn’t recommend locking yourself up in your room the whole time. I made sure in the month leading up to the HSC I had some activities to look forward to, as well as library dates with friends and family time too which helped counter unproductive study and much stress.

GOOD-LUCK! – Isobel ☺
The first day of Year 12 you feel awesome, you’re now the seniors of the school and have first priority for everything. But then it occurs to you that you’re going to be sitting five three hour exams that will determine the uni course you’re going to get into and thus the career you’re going to pursue and therefore the person you’re going to marry and the house you’re going to live in for the rest of your life!!! Don’t freak out guys, you have a plan to secure your future and teachers are always there to support you.

12 MONTHS BEFORE THE EXAMS- SETTING GOALS!

Set a goal for yourself. Know what you are aiming for, know what you want to do, it’s much easier to aim to get into a course then it is to try and get a number!

6 MONTHS BEFORE THE EXAM- GET A HEAD START!

Remember the HSC is not a measure of your intelligence but rather the amount of effort you are willing to put in to achieve your goals. Don’t worry; the hard work will pay off at the end of the marathon. Always get a head start on your studies leaving nothing to the last minute, do a little bit every day and before you know it HSC will be over!

- Start doing as many HSC past papers and Trial papers you can grab a hold of, there is never a shortage of papers to do, teachers and friends have excellent resources with Trial papers from heaps of different schools don’t be scared to ask for more.

- Keep a mistake book where you can record all your mistakes remembering never to make the same mistake again! Try keeping a collection of awesome questions that were challenging. This is especially helpful for Extension 1 and Extension 2 Maths.

- Set daily goals for yourself ensuring that you finish everything so that you won’t fall behind and get overwhelmed by the amount of work. It feels awesome at the end of the day knowing that your list is all crossed out and done!

- Practice, practice, practice your writing for essay-based subjects. Get them marked and ask for feedback. You may hate writing essays, but it is THE only way you will improve. For Legal Studies alone, I wrote at least 20 essays in the build up to the HSC.

2 MONTHS BEFORE THE EXAM- STAY ON TRACK!

Your Trials might have just finished and graduation is around the corner, but NEVER slack off, if anything you should be doubling the amount of HSC papers you’re doing every week.

BEFORE THE EXAM

Don’t talk to anyone before the exam, go to bed early and avoid all contact with anyone that is going to freak you out! While you’re waiting outside the exam hall just listen to some music and read through your notes alone, don’t try to talk to friends, we all know there’s that one person that runs around freaking everyone else out insisting that there’s this syllabus dot point that doesn’t really exist.
When you think about the HSC I am sure your mind goes straight to the final exams at the end of the year. However, it should go to your next assessment task since the HSC is a process and your work ethic and study throughout the year is equally as important as the few weeks’ worth of study prior to your HSC exams.

For me, I believe the most important advice I could give is that you should study constantly throughout the year (memorising your notes, formulas, laws, quotes and understanding your work throughout the year will relieve the pressure when your Trials and HSC arrive because trying to learn/memorise something for the second time is so much easier than learning it from scratch) and think of each Assessment Task as if it were the HSC itself. This will not only make you feel more confident when Trials and the HSC arrive but will also make studying much less stressful as you will not have to cram and will have free time to spend with friends, doing hobbies or just relaxing.

Another important thing I learnt was that students seem to think writing notes over and over again will make studying easier and more efficient, though I think doing this is just a way people procrastinate (since you think you are studying but not actually understanding or processing anything) and if you are processing what you are writing, you are limited by how much you take in. You are better off just summarising only what you MUST remember (for example, just all the laws and cases in Legal, or for English, the quotes you want to include in essays) and then looking back at your classwork or the textbook to understand background knowledge (what the laws do or what the quotes show). For me, this was an effective way to study as I could elaborate in my essays since I was not limited in my knowledge by what I had memorised, but rather, understood what I was writing.

Also, for my whole schooling life I can remember dreading Year 12 because I pictured myself locked in my house for months studying constantly, stressing and not having any fun or a social life whatsoever. Year 12 is nothing like this and you can do equally well in the HSC while still maintaining a balance with friends and enjoying yourself, as long as you find a balance which works for you and you don’t fall behind in your study. The only time I completely stressed out was prior to the Trials because I probably didn’t use my time during the Term 2/3 holidays as effectively as I could have and Trials do come really quickly. So I recommend you start studying for Trials early (Term 2 holidays – as in normal school time, so Term 3 for Year 12) but pace yourself so you aren’t cramming last minute (unless cramming works well for you and actually helps you memorise better!)

What worried me most throughout Year 12 is when people would tell me that you have to study 6 hours a night in order to get in the high 90s (I don’t think I ever did this once). If you have finished what you have to do for the night and are up-to-date with your work, endless hours of study is highly unnecessary because you will just be finding things to study that you don’t need to do and this will leave you feeling bored and frustrated.

Another important point is that you should study for each subject differently or in a way which best suits the subject. For example:

- Legal: memorising important points including LCMs and background information on what they are about
- Maths: Past papers
- English: memorising essays
- Economics: Past papers
- Business Studies: memorising the syllabus back to front and reading the textbook

Lastly, during Year 12 there are no rules!! For example, people would say to me you have to study 6 hours a day, shouldn’t get your Ps because you’ll be tempted to go out, write a study timetable for every night, or that you can’t get a good ATAR if you don’t do extension subjects. I did none of those things and still managed to get 99.1. So basically, what I am trying to say, is that you must do whatever works for you because if it works for you, then you can achieve whatever mark you want to achieve!
HOW I TACKLED THE HSC

1. Ask for help!
   If you’re struggling with a subject it’s always best to ask, and definitely sooner rather than later to avoid stressing about 5 syllabus dot points the night before trials.

2. Take initiative
   Get a tutor, start that assignment early, seek out practice tests. If you want to get ahead, you can't just cruise.

3. Prioritize + be strategic!
   If you're really low on time, sometimes you have to put some tasks ahead of others. So make sure you choose the right tasks to prioritize- don’t spend hours on something that’s worth 5% when you also have to study for a test worth 20%. That being said, each of your subjects is important so don’t study one subject too much so that it comes at the expense of others.

4. Take time out
   Don’t think you need to have some crazy study schedule during stuvac that means you have 10-hour study days. I was never one of those people who could sit down and study for hours on end with no break, and you don’t have to to get a good ATAR. Study consistently, but take time out to de-stress.

5. Exercise
   Perfect for relieving stress, and it allows you some time to clear your head.

6. Just do it
   Procrastination is usually every HSC student’s biggest problem, and the only way to tackle it really is to follow Ms. Alvarado’s mantra - Just Do It! The task will be the same whenever you complete it, and chances are that you’ll be more stressed the longer you put it off. So why wait? The assessment or subject isn’t going to magically disappear, you just have to face it head on, or else it’ll come to Trials and you’ll have an even bigger freak out.

7. Write notes early
   Or else you’ll end up spending a week of stuvac writing 25 page English notes, which from experience is not a good idea.

8. Stick to a study schedule
   That is, do not spend a week of stuvac writing 25 page English notes! Set out guidelines for what subjects you’ll be studying and for how long and try your best to stick to it.

9. Don't stress too much about Trials, they’re not life and death
   Some people put too much emphasis on Trials, but really they’re just another assessment task. Although some Trials are weighted more than your assessments (so yes they are important and
you should definitely study for them), don't expect to know the entire HSC course for the Trial. Nobody expects that of you, you just don’t have the time to at that stage.

10. Study by yourself before exams
Hang out with other people and you'll just get sucked into a black hole of freak-outs and stress. Quietly revise your notes somewhere away from people who are going ask you how you would answer an impossible question from a Catholic Schools paper or convince you there is some imaginary topic in the test that you haven't covered.

11. Be confident (or fake it)
One of my major problems was a lack of confidence in my abilities. If going into an exam room you feel overwhelmed with self-doubt, you just need to tell yourself that you're going to ace it, even if you don't think you are. Listen to some pump-up music, recite mantras to yourself, anything that makes you feel more confident going in. In the words of Henry Ford: "Whether you think you can, or think you can't - you're right."

12. Teach other people about your subject + pace around and recite your notes
These are the two most effective ways that I found to study, but everyone is different of course so find what works for you.

13. Hand in essays and get feedback, even if you don't want to
Getting feedback may be the difference between two bands. Suck it up!

14. Talk to people and enjoy year 12!
Keep your friends close so you can talk to them when you're stressed out - you're all going through the same thing. Don’t shut other people out because you’re too focused on studying, and don’t miss the fun days in year 12 like dress up days. I’ve seen girls do this in my year and they wind up miserable and with nobody to offload to. The HSC shouldn't mean that you have to sacrifice your social life, so make sure you enjoy the fun aspects of year 12 and still hang out with friends.

15. Consistently work at your subjects
Pretty obvious, but a lot of people don’t do this. It’s especially important with languages, as you definitely cannot cram for them.

16. Practice tests are the best way to study!
17. Legal- use your summary booklet
It was one of the most effective study resources I had at my disposal - this booklet covers all the syllabus points, so use it!

18. Team up
Studying with friends is great because you see where the gaps in your knowledge are and learn from each other (as well as have other people to freak out with).

19. Self-discipline- push yourself
This is probably the secret to success for the majority of high-achieving HSC students. In the end you just have to decide how badly you want a good result and what you’re willing to do for it. Sure you can sit around and watch Breaking Bad reruns all day during stuvac but that won’t really do much for your ATAR. Find your motivation and run with it. It’s all about how much you’re willing to work for it.