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STAGE: The Middle Schooler's Guide to Success

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“STAGE: The Middle Schooler’s Guide to Success”

written by

Kelsey Harrison

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Setting the Stage

For some, the thought of middle school brings back happy memories of JV sports, fine arts competitions, and lunch with friends. For others, thoughts of homework struggles, drama, and other adolescent woes come to mind. Whatever the words “middle school” bring back, it can be agreed by all that middle school is a time of change: biological changes, mental changes, and environmental changes. Amidst all of that, a middle school student’s academic world changes as well. Grades K-2 were new and exciting adventures. In grades 3-5, most students settled into a comfortable academic routine. Suddenly they enter grades 6-8 and while there are new adventures, not many students would call them exciting. In fact, they would probably call them overwhelming. I know I did.

In order to fully explain the significance and intent behind what I am writing, I feel as though I should offer a brief background explanation of my middle school experience. Until 6th grade, I was able to tread water, so to speak. Once I journeyed into 6th grade, I began to sink fast. Most major events of my middle school career occurred in the 6th grade, both years of 6th grade. I switched to a private college-preparatory school mid-way through the year, effectively plopping me into the dreaded role of “new kid.” Just when I thought I had finally outgrown such status, I learned that I was to repeat the 6th grade earning me the moniker once again. I was socially awkward—more than your average pre-teen. I always managed to get myself involved with the drama cliques, which did absolutely nothing for my self-esteem and perceived social status (as much social status as one has as an 11-year-old). At this time, I also learned that I showed signs of Dysgraphia, a learning disability in the brain that causes me to struggle with reading comprehension and writing skills. At this age, all I saw was yet another label added to my name. Lastly, the typical pre-teen changes were beginning to affect me as well. This, of

course, meant that my hormones soaring which, in turn, meant that I could cry or scream at the drop of a hat. On top of all of those struggles, I was expected to ~~sueeeed~~ exceed in my academics.

In this sink-or-swim moment, I felt like I was sinking. I was, but not in the way that I thought. Looking back, it is clear that there were many moments where my parents, teachers, and tutor all attempted to correct me and instruct me, but I would not receive it, not for lack of caring, but because I did not understand that it all mattered. Because of my attitude, those that supported me agreed to have me placed in a new class that my school was offering: Study Skills. This class was created for students, like me, who needed specific instruction in organization skills and time-management. At first, this class was something I was forced to be in; therefore, it was something I didn't like. By the end of the semester, I realized that I had enjoyed my time in that class. I learned about something that I could be good at, that would make my life easier, and that I had total control over: three elements that will make any middle schooler interested.

As I got older, I realized that I had developed a passion for helping students like me with these skills as well. We have often heard the phrase "give a man fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." In a sense the same can be said about middle school students: give them guidance, and they do it once; *teach* them how to do it, and they can apply it for a lifetime. Middle school life can be summed up in four words: change, responsibility, motivation, and structure. Students either have these things or they don't. One way teachers can ensure all of these goals are achieved is through giving students a universal skill that will be used their entire life: organization.

Change—this one word encompasses almost all of the middle school years. There are numerous biological changes, psychological changes, and cognitive changes occurring in adolescent years. In their book *Instructional Strategies for Middle and High School* Larson and Keiper (2014) explain that biological changes affect many “changes occurring in the body” including “adolescent body size and shape, nutritional needs, [and] mood swings,” and that “physical development is not linked to social maturity, emotional stability, or cognitive ability (P. 5).” However, all of these changes have an impact on the student’s learning environment. Every student will go through physical changes at a different pace, which could lead some students to become uncomfortable with their appearance, making them uncomfortable in a place where they used to, and should, feel safe.

Along with the physical changes occurring in middle school students, their perception is also changing. These students used to be very matter-of-fact and only capable of black-and-white thinking. Now, however, they are “increasingly able to think about possibilities, hypotheses, and abstract concepts” (Larson & Keiper, 2014, p. 5). While this idea is intriguing to any teacher ready to explore concepts on a deeper level in the classroom, it also means that *every* event a student goes through during any given day is susceptible to this way of thinking. In other words, early adolescent students will begin placing a lot of weight in how they are perceived by their peers. As Henry Wong (2014) states in his book, *The Classroom management book*, “Students who may feel isolated and outcast, long to be on the same page as their peers.” In their elementary years, many students were unapologetically themselves. While this mindset still remains in some students by the time they are in middle school, many are already beginning to ask “what if” questions and think through worst-case-scenarios about something as simple as raising their hand in class or choosing a seat in the lunch room. “*What if* I get the wrong

answer?” “*What if I get the right answer and people call me a nerd?*” “What do I do if I fall on my face trying to get my lunch?” All of these are questions that go through most middle schooler’s minds at least once. Students are beginning to be fearful of a place that once felt safe. This is just a small part of the psychological and cognitive changes occurring in the adolescent years.

All “of these rapid physical, emotional, and intellectual changes” occurring in “early adolescents” create a “unique period in a child’s development” (Kauchak & Eggen, 2014, p. 191). This time is unique, yes, but any individual who has been through middle school will agree that it also creates a chaotic and overwhelming time as well. The three areas of change mentioned above are all tied together. However, there is one area of change that is not often talked about in this context: academics.

Suddenly in the middle school years there is so much more expected of the students and more weight placed on their success or lack thereof. With more weight on academics comes more responsibility. Not only that, students have responsibilities that they have never had to deal with before. Organization and time-management have usually been modeled for them at school, but it is not typically explicitly taught. And, even though it is modeled, the students don’t necessarily pay attention to it. While in-school time management is still mostly done for them, the students are suddenly responsible for any down time they have at school as well as their own time at home. Many students are “latch-key” kids; they go home to little or no supervision. They are responsible for themselves and any siblings they may have. That is a lot of pressure to place on children. Most students will rise to the occasion, but not without difficulty. At home, they are not only responsible for general at-home activities but also for an increased amount of homework. At school, students are responsible for keeping themselves organized between

classes, in class, and to/ from school. Again, they are responsible for it, but not explicitly taught these skills. All of this new-found responsibility begins to weigh heavily on the changing mind of a middle school student.

This leads to another change that occurs in the mind of middle school students: motivation. If a student feels defeated before he or she even begins a task, he or she lose motivation to even begin that task. Many middle school students feel as though they are fighting an uphill battle; thus, they lack the motivation they had in previous years. As elementary students, many of them could be motivated by the thought of impressing or disappointing their teacher and parents. Middle school students aren't affected by that as much as their younger counterparts. They are at an age where it is important to develop intrinsic motivation; they need to become self-motivated to do their own work. Larson and Keiper (2014) define intrinsic motivation as "motivation to engage in an activity because of the satisfaction derived from the activity itself" (p.11). Some students will, of course, always be motivated by seeing A's on their report cards, while others will begin to not see the point of grades. Some students will always be motivated by their parent/guardians, some students may not have that opportunity, and some just won't care. All of this is to say that most students at this age will need to be shown that there is something to be gained and appreciated in each task they are asked to complete. This will help them strive to complete these tasks.

The last major change I am going to address is structure. First, it is important to note that the literal structure of the school day has changed. Most students did not change classes in elementary school, and if they did it was maybe up to three times. Now they are changing classes throughout the day, with maybe five minutes between classes. The students are doing more independent activities throughout the day. They have athletics and fine arts classes that often

become competition-based. The structure of classes and everyday school things changes, but so does a student's desire to have structure. Though they would never admit it, these students long for stability, direction, and purpose" (Wong, 2014, p.14). Many students come from places where consistency is lacking. They crave an environment and process that they can depend on to stay constant.

While it may not seem like the first choice, teaching students organization and time management will provide students with the chance to have control over something that can remain constant while also giving them skills that can be transferred outside of the classroom. This is not to say that presenting middle school students with the idea of learning about time-management and organization will strike a positive chord with them. It didn't with me. The information needs to be presented in such a way that middle school students can relate to it. They also need to feel like they are being spoken to instead of being told to do it. These were my goals when creating the short booklet that follows. *STAGE: The Middle Schooler's Guide to Success* is my way of taking what I have experienced and learned about the pre-teen mind, time management, and organization and helping middle school students put that information to use for themselves.

STAGE: The Middle Schooler's Guide to Success

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Chapter 1: Introduction (AKA: Why am I reading this?)

Chapter Goals:

- *To give you an understanding why I wrote this.*
- *To help you understand that this is for you & I am on your side!*

Great, you were handed this booklet to read and told to read it. Why? Don't they know that you have *plenty* of other things to do?! I mean seriously, between classes, projects, homework, tests, after school activities, and keeping a social life, what's a kid to do? I'll be real with you; you've got to balance it all. BUT, that's why you're reading this: to help you become a better student and, hopefully, make all of this middle school craziness easier to manage! I hope to bring some relief by saying that this is probably the longest amount of reading in this little book. I wrote this with YOU in mind. You've got enough on your plate without me rambling on about your planner and locker for thirty pages. I also understand you have plenty of stuff to remember, so we'll be using an acronym to remember the characteristics of being the best student you can be. Before you tell me "I'm already the best student," let me just say: There is *always* room for improvement. And for those of you that say "I'll never be any good," I say: Not if you don't try. The only way you can fail is by not trying. Sure, you'll make mistakes along the way, but that's because you're learning.

All that said, I want to kick this whole thing off with a {short} story. I used to know a kid that absolutely adored school. (Yes, it's possible!) Reading was fun, science was great, math was awesome, but spelling and writing became increasingly difficult. The more difficult the tasks became, the less the kid enjoyed doing them. Eventually, she got to a point where she felt like she was drowning in late work, tests, projects and the like. She didn't even want to go to school at all. Luckily, in the 6th grade (the second time through) she had great teachers, tutors, and a

study skills class that helped tremendously. I know all of this because I am that kid. I was given an opportunity to improve my abilities as a learner and I took it—reluctantly at first. I didn't want to admit that I had control over how unsuccessful I was in school, but the moment I did, that I began to grow. I am now nearing the end of my college career and what I learned, and what I'm going to share with you, still plays a major role in my academic life. I still struggle with school; it didn't get easier. However, it did become manageable and more enjoyable again. I share this story not to brag, but to tell you that it is possible to improve, even if you don't think so at this moment.

Recap:

So, to recap:

- I know where you're coming from, *and* where you can go.
- This was written for YOU.

Chapter 2: Space—Get in the Zone

Chapter Goals:

- *Be able to define your “Study Zone.”*
- *Know how to manage your “Study Zone.”*
- *Know how to manage your other academic spaces.*

Have you ever looked for your tennis shoes and had trouble finding them? I mean you’ve looked EVERYWHERE and they have just vanished. Suddenly you have the thought to look... in the closet. Boom. There they are, right where they belong. Because you don’t always put them there, however, the thought had not occurred for you to look there. This chapter is filled with information that should help you avoid these kinds of situations in the future.

I’m sure you have heard the phrase “a place for everything and everything in its place.” As much as I hate to admit it--it’s true. While not everyone may have the same place for everything, everything still has a place where it belongs. Imagine what it would be like if anytime you needed something, you knew where to find it. What if you could erase the words “lost” and “I can’t find it,” at least in terms of school-related things, from your vocabulary? I know, go ahead, roll your eyes or giggle, but it is possible. Keeping things in their respective place will not only help you know where they are, but it will also clear and organize the space around you, which then helps you have a clearer mind while working.

Throughout this chapter, we’re going to look at some tips and tricks to help you choose a study space, and help you keep that space, as well as some other academic-related spaces, organized. Some of you may read this and think that this doesn’t apply to you because “I can study anywhere!” While that may be true, there are only one or two places where you study *best*.

Others may say, “I have an organizational system and I’m not changing it”; that’s fine so long as your system is leaving you with the ability to study and know where everything is.

Study Zone

So what is this “space” that I continually refer to? Well, just like actors have their “zone,” or their workspace that allows them to be the most prepared for each performance, we, as students have “study zones.”

Definition of a “Study Zone”

- A place with minimal distraction
- A place where you’re comfortable, not curl-up-on-the-couch-comfortable, but a place where you feel able to work
- A place where you’re away from non-homework-related electronics—sorry

*I know this is the last thing you want to read, but you probably shouldn’t be doing your homework in front of the TV either. Not only will it tire out your eyes and brain, but it will also create an easy, avoidable distraction. If you need the noise, make sure you face a different direction than the screen to avoid accidentally watching TV.

Activity 2.1:

Write your top 1 or 2 study spaces here: _____

Now that we’ve identified your study space, let’s talk about keeping that space worthy of the title “Study Zone.” The biggest concern is keeping the space clutter-free. Don’t let things pile up unnecessarily. “How do I do that,” you ask? Well, first thing is to make sure you Throw. Trash. Away! You know those scratch papers for your math homework or the crumbled up

notebook pages you've used trying to start that paper, those papers you use to draw on to avoid studying (I do it too): they go in the trash. Throwing all of that away will keep your Study Zone clean. It is not helpful when you're looking for tonight's homework and you find a half-torn piece of scrap paper from three weeks ago.

The next step to keeping a clean study zone is to keep like things together and keep them in one place. Have one place for your writing utensils, one place for your papers, one place to put your backpack, one place for your binders and so on. I know you're reading that and thinking "It can't be that simple." But it is! Keeping your study zone neat is as simple as throwing trash away and keeping things together. The hardest part about that is actually taking the two minutes every day to do those two things.

Locker and Backpack

Now, while we're on topic of keeping spaces organized, let's talk about two more spaces involved in your daily routine: your locker and your backpack. While it may not seem like it, these are two very important spaces to keep neat. They're the places you visit the most throughout the day. The backpack helps you carry your books and work to and from school. The locker holds everything you're not using. These two facts alone mean that it is possible for the backpack and the locker to get pretty messy in just one day. The messy locker and backpack then translate to unfinished and late homework, missing and ripped up notes, and the phrase "I can't find...". If that is familiar to you, I understand. If my middle school life was a movie, my character's catchphrase would be "I can't find it!" Luckily, I received some helpful tips about how to keep these spaces organized, and I'm going to pass them along to you.

The first tip is to have a folder in your backpack with a spot for loose papers. You could even use a pocket of one of your binders. The idea is that you don't want pieces of paper just

sitting there to be crushed. So, until you have a moment to get the paper put away where it belongs, put it in that folder.

The second tip is to use a shelf in your locker. It doesn't have to be fancy, just something to give you a little extra space to put your books and binders. However, you should not be putting loose papers in your locker! They need to go in that folder we talked about earlier.

Recap

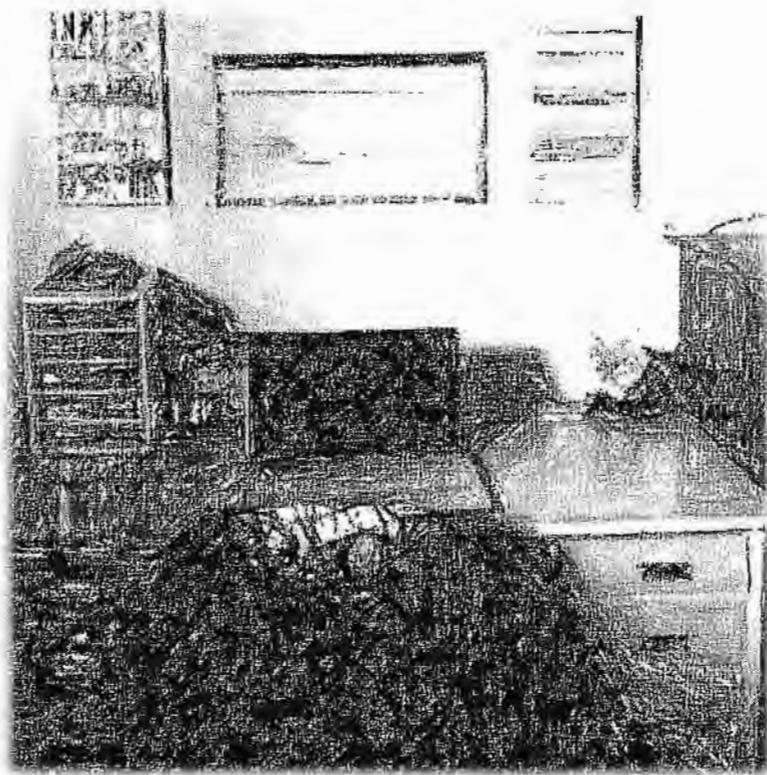
Everything we've talked about in this chapter either may seem like a small detail or like it is not even that important, but each of these steps will make a difference in the spaces you use every day. Here's a quick recap since we talked about quite a few different things.

- Remember a "study zone" is a fairly comfortable place with minimal distraction.
- Keep your study zone neat by throwing trash away and keeping things put away.
- Keep loose papers in a folder so they don't clutter up your locker and backpack.
- See if you can get a locker shelf to help make use of space.

Activity 2.2

Take a minute to draw what you want your study space to look like.

Here's what mine looks like:



Draw yours here:

Chapter 3: Time

Chapter Goals:

- *Be able to set up and follow a routine.*
- *Understand the importance of time management.*
- *Be able to effectively manage your time.*
- *Understand the importance of productive breaks.*

You're at school Monday through Friday, so you're left with two options: Saturday and Sunday. Let's face it, you have plenty of other things you need to be doing and would rather be doing than taking care of all of the little things you didn't do during the week. Part of being not only a successful student, but also successful in general, is having time management.

Time Management

Time management isn't as scary as it sounds. It just means you have a routine. I don't mean you have to get as specific as "6:30 – Wake up, 6:32 – brush teeth," but a routine is something so that you have a general plan for the day. For example, as soon as I am done with school, I go home, take a short break, do homework, eat dinner, clean up, and set things (such as clothes, breakfast, and backpack) out for the next day. I may not do them all at the same time every day, but I do it in the same order. Some people might think that knowing what you're going to do every day is boring, but it doesn't have to be. Just because you have a general routine doesn't mean you have to do the exact same thing every day. You might be going over to a friend's house one night, or you may have game to go to, or you may have no homework. Those kinds of fun things will change your daily schedule up, but it doesn't mean that you don't do what you need to do.

Let's take a look at my daily routine:

5-7:30 AM – Wake up and Get Ready

6-7 PM Dinner

8 AM- 4PM – School

7-8 PM Homework

4:30-6 PM – Homework

8-9:30 PM Reset and Wind Down

Notice that I don't do the exact same thing at the exact same time each day, but I do the same things in every day. Throughout this chapter, we're going to look more specifically at what we can do with our time that will make us better learners.

Time to get Organized

The first thing we're going to talk about goes with the organizational skills we discussed in the last chapter: It is important that you actually *take the time* to keep your space organized, which means cleaning. I get it. Cleaning, even just a little bit, every day, does *not* sound like fun. You're right! It's not fun, but it is necessary. Would you believe me if I said that a little bit of work every day could help you avoid very large problems? Well, believe it or not it's true. Five to Ten minutes of tidying up every day will help avoid problems like having to spend a full day cleaning, losing you work, losing your cool, and getting stressed. Don't think of this time as cleaning up, hut as hitting a reset button. You're going to re-set everything you have used today in order to get ready for the next day.

So what will those 5-10 minutes of resetting look like? First, it's best to make sure that you do it towards the end of the day. If you're asking me why, ask yourself this: "Have I ever been in such a rush in the morning that I forgot something?" If your answer is no, you're lucky. If your answer is yes, I'm about spend the rest of this chapter giving you tips on how to avoid

this in the future. If you don't want to start resetting everything too late in the day, at least make sure you wait until after your homework is done. That way you can get packed up and ready for the next day without interrupting homework time. So, once your homework is finished, take all of your finished work and whatever else you need to take back to school and put it in your backpack. Before you zip up your bag and call it done, check your planner. Use a planner to (1) Make sure you actually finished all of your work, and (2) You are putting everything back in your backpack that you need.

Another helpful thing to do at night is to set out what you're wearing the next day. I know that sounds kind of silly, but it is really helpful. For you fashion-forward people, it keeps you from changing outfits three times in one morning, thus saving you some time and your parents some laundry. For the rest of us, it helps us make sure we look presentable to the rest of the school.

At the end of the day, it is important that you're looking ahead and are aware of what needs to be done both before and *for* the next day. Take the time to hit that reset button the night before instead of rushing to do so in the morning.

Homework Time

So we've talked about what to do *after* you've done your homework, but we haven't talked about what your homework time should look like. You might have just made a rather confused face, because homework time is homework time, right? You get home, you immediately sit still and work until you're done, right? Not quite. That's not to say that you need to work a problem, play a video game, work a problem, play outside and so on. You want to make sure that what time you are spending doing your work is productive. Remember, your homework is reinforcing what you learned during the school day, so you want to do everything

you can to make sure that what you learned sticks. That said, there are some things you can do to help homework time, and there are things you can do that will make homework time more difficult.

Let's look at some do's and don'ts of homework time:

	Do's	Don'ts
When to work on Homework	DO – give yourself a SMALL break between school and homework. Your brain will be tired, so give it a rest. That way homework time is as effective as it can be. Your break should be somewhere between 5-30 minutes after school.	DON'T- give yourself so much of a break that you're going to run out of time. Give yourself 5-30 minutes after school, and that includes the car/bus ride home and any after-school activities.
How to work on Homework	DO – Set some kind of order in which to do your work, whether that is in order of your schedule or harder to easier classes.	DON'T – Randomly do your work. Don't get 3 questions into your science homework, switch to math, and then go to English homework when you're bored. You won't get all of your work done.
Doing ALL of my Homework	DO – Take a break. You don't have to do it all at one time! Set a timer for 1 hour or however long you can be productive. When the timer goes off take a 5-minute brain break (more on those later).	DON'T – Rush through it all at once. Also, don't do one question, take a break, rinse & repeat—you'll never get everything done. Neither of those options will do you any favors.
Do I really have to do it all?	YES! The answer is still yes.
Does studying for a test/ working on a project count as homework?	YES!	Again, the answer is still yes, but let's talk about that some more.

Testing, Testing, 1,2,3 ...

I'm about to tell you a very important piece of information about tests and how to study for them. It is the trick to getting a good grade every single time: DO NOT CRAM! I know about half of you reading this will roll your eyes, but I am serious. Do you think you would hear something too much if it were a lie? I'm going to assume that most of the people who have told you not to cram were adults who wished they would have listened to that advice when it was given to them. In middle school, you're likely to learn about an upcoming test anywhere from a four days to a week in advance. This is plenty of time to successfully study.

Cramming for a test is not helpful for multiple reasons. The first, and probably most interesting reason, is that it is not good for your brain. Your brain has a process that it follows when learning new things, and it needs time to follow that process. It takes a few days for your brain to process a new idea, and it takes another few days for that idea to become a memory. From there, you have to train your brain to put that memory into a long-term memory bank. Otherwise, you won't have truly *learned* the information, but instead you will have memorized it. Another reason cramming is not beneficial is because you do not have time to become comfortable and confident with the majority of the information and end up going into the test with a lot of unnecessary anxiety.

So what is considered cramming for a test? Waiting until the night before, or any time after that, to begin studying is cramming. Why? Because less than 12 hours is not near enough time for your brain to process information. The night before any test, you should confidently review any study aids you made throughout your study process. Any flash cards, study guides, or online practice quizzes should all be made at least two nights before the test. That way, if nothing else, you have the night before to look over the study aids. If you have an amazingly

wonderful teacher who gives you a study guide, you have zero excuses for not having it completed the night before. All of this will help you be a more successful test-taker.

To answer our question from earlier: yes, studying for upcoming tests counts as homework. So, when Mom or Dad asks, “Do you have homework?” answering, “No, but I have a test to study for” is not a correct answer. The bad news about classifying studying as homework means that you have to do it. The good news is that it falls under all of our previously mentioned homework dos’ and don’ts – that includes the part about taking a [productive] break.

Take 5

I’ve mentioned study breaks a few times now, and I’m sure there are some of you reading this who are still confused as to why I would suggest putting the books down. Think about it, even your favorite actors get a “take 5” on set. Everyone needs, and deserves, a break every now and then. Your brain can only handle so much. Giving it five to ten minutes to recuperate before moving on can help you be productive. Instead of looking at your homework thinking “I’ve got Math problems, an English paper, a History assignment, and science test on Friday,” break it up. Think more along the lines of “I’ll set a timer for one hour and will get as far as I can on my science study guide, then I’ll move on to English paper, and *then* I’ll take a break.” It will keep you from feeling overwhelmed and help you look forward to that break.

There are a few things to note about this break time. The first is that you have to earn it. If you set that homework timer and play on your phone or stare out the window, you have already wasted more time than your break will allow. The second thing is that your break, along with your homework time, needs to be as technology-free as possible. If you pick up your phone, tablet, or other electronic device, you won’t put it down. If you use it as your timer, that is okay, but it needs to be put away otherwise. The last thing about this study break is that it needs to be a

productive break. I know that sounds like an oxymoron, but it isn't. Playing on your phone, or getting up and walking around, one of those is going to keep your brain moving more than the other—and I'm sorry to say, it's not the one that involves a screen. Can't think of what to do? Make yourself a "Take 5" list so that you can pick an activity from there when you need a break. Some things to put on that list could be: 5 laps around the kitchen, 10 jumping jacks, 5 minutes to put your head down. Things to make sure you don't have on that list: Watching cat videos, playing on your phone, watching TV.

Recap

All in all time management involves a lot of little things, but looking at them as a whole, it just means: use your time wisely. In this chapter, we've gone over how you, as a middle schooler, can use your time to be the most successful student you can be.

Remember:

- Make a daily routine – and follow it.
- Actually take the time to get organized!
- Make your homework time as productive as possible: take a break if you need to, have a system, and pace yourself.
- Do not cram for a test.
- PRODUCTIVE study breaks are good.

Activity 3.1: List 5 “Take 5” activities you think would be helpful. Use this page when you don’t know what to do.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Activity 3.2: Make a layout of your daily routine. Use mine for a reference if you need to.

Chapter 4: aaannnddd Action!

Chapter Goals:

- *Understand how and why to take action.*
- *Be able to define and understand the necessity of using a planner.*
- *Understand the need to be proactive.*

I can't stress it enough: organization takes Action. Great things don't just happen. This whole book is filled with tips and tricks on staying organized, but reading them isn't enough. I know we all wish it was that easy. You have to take initiative and make things happen. Yes, with everything you've read so far, making sure to act on it might feel overwhelming, but that's what this chapter is for. I am going to make sure you know how to organize your organization. I know it sounds crazy, but it works—I've tried it.

Close your eyes and imagin... okay maybe don't close your eyes, but imagine the two different scenarios:

Scene 1: You're sitting at your study space thinking through the next school day. Okay, so for math I have pages 32-34, for English.... Then you realize--you have a test tomorrow... and you have no clue where your study guide is... You finally find it in the bottom of your back pack, missing the last page. You also realize you left your book at school. Now you not only have to fill out the Study Guide, but also to fill it out from memory AND try and get ahold of someone so you can get the info from the last page.

Scene 2: You sit down in your study space and look at your planner. You see a reminder that you have a test tomorrow. Lucky for you, you had it in your planner for the week, so you made flash cards two days ago. You pull those out and start studying. You realize that, even

though you haven't looked at the cards in two days, you actually know a good bit of the information. So, you move on to the other two assignments you have for the night.

Which scene would you rather be the star in? While I'm sure at one point or another we've all been in scene 1, everybody has the ability to be in scene 2, it just requires some work—yes, work—on the front end. I know you're going back and reading that thinking "it's too good to be true. I'll never be that kid." Maybe you should ask yourself why you won't be that kid. Is it because those kids aren't cool? Is it because you don't think you can do it? Or is it because you've never even thought about it? Here's some advice: The kids that are organized early, have a lot easier time staying organized later (and believe me, if you think staying organized in middle school is hard, staying organized in college is crazy!). Yes, you can do it; it just takes a little preparation. And it's time to start thinking about it.

Let's take a look at how you can put all of this knowledge you've read so far to good use:

Get a Planner

It does NOT have to be a store-bought, \$25, pretty colors thing. I mean if that's what suites you, that's great! **A planner is simply a bound set of paper that you write your assignments, and homework supplies lists** (more on that later), **in daily**. So notice that there are three important words in this definition of a planner. Here's why they're important.

A *bound* planner is important because we've already said loose papers are a no-no. Bound can mean anything from a spiral notebook to some paper in 3-brad-folder, to a store-bought planner. It needs a tough shell, if you will, to keep it in tact, so it needs to be a planner, notebook, or folder; that way it will survive a school-years' worth of daily trips between classes.

Assignments are important because you're not just writing down tonight's homework. I mean yes, do that! But don't do *just* that. If you have a test on Friday, that goes in your planner, even if it's Monday. If you have a project due next week, that goes in your planner. Furthermore, whoever helps you get your supplies for that project will thank you for not telling them the night before it's due. Everything for the week goes in your planner, especially big assignments like papers, projects, and tests. Those are not like your daily homework. They need to be *planned* out in advance, which you can't do if you don't write it down.

Daily is also important. If you're like the organized version of me, you like to plan ahead and write things down for the entire week, which is FANTASTIC! Don't get me wrong, planning ahead is wonderful. But what happens when you decide not to take your planner to class because you have everything written down, and your teacher starts to make changes to your assignments? Now you have the wrong assignment written, and you have to remember to change it. Even if you write your assignments down before hand, you need to look at your planner and adjust it daily.

Think of your favorite movie. Now think of your favorite actor or actress in that movie. We both know that the movie would not have been as amazing as it was if the actor didn't have a script. That script told them when to say what line, gave them stage directions (AKA told them where to be and when to be there), and what props they needed. This planner is like your script. It won't tell you what to say, although we all we know that would be helpful. Your planner *will* tell you what you need to take home. Think of those as your props. It will also tell you what assignments are due when, like an actor's stage directions.

Stay On Top of Your Game

Don't think for a minute that things will just fall nicely into place. If there is one thing I have learned, it's that your internet will crash, your printer will run out of ink, and you will lose that file you need; and all of this will happen at the worst possible moment, too. So, plan ahead. Everything we have gone over so far will not be helpful unless you take action. Is all of this work? Yes. Does it feel like a waste of time? Yes... even to me sometimes! It feels overwhelming and unnecessary--until it pays off.

Use your planner. Study in your Study Space. Take the time to keep it all neat. If you do all of these things, you will begin to see a difference in your academic life. It may not necessarily be easier, but it will, if nothing else, be less overwhelming. So, take some time and think through what you need to do each day. Make a space in your planner for a daily "to-do" list or use a notepad. That way you can keep track of what needs to be done, and what you have already accomplished.

Recap

Always check your planner. That way you know what needs to go on your "to-do" list. Lastly, take action. You can accomplish things you never thought possible if you just take the time and work hard.

Remember:

- Use your planner
- Be Proactive
- ALWAYS DO YOUR BEST!

Activity 4.1: Make a To-Do List

Grab your planner. Use the space below to write out the things you need to do today in order of when you need to work on them. Include things like homework (including tests to study for and projects to work on), and chores.

Activity 4.2: Create your planner page

Some schools have a planner with a pre-made layout, if you have one of those planners, and it works for you, move on to chapter 5. If you have your own planner, or need to make one, use a piece of notebook paper to sketch out how you want to organize it.

Chapter 5: GOAL!

“Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll land among the stars”- Unknown

Chapter Goals:

- *Understand that achieving your goals will take time and preparation.*
- *Understand the importance of setting goals.*
- *Be able to set long and short term goals.*

Think about your favorite actor again. The greatest actors, singers, and other public figures all have one thing in common: they started somewhere. That starting point may have been *very* different from where they are now, but they started. When I decided I was going to write this short book, my steps started out very small, but I had a big goal in mind. My ultimate goal is to have this book in the hands of students like you, but I couldn’t wake up one morning and write this. It took planning, preparation, and goals.

So what does this mean to you? You’re reading this like, “I’m not trying to write a book! I’m trying to pass math!” That’s still a goal, and it’s a good one. The thing to remember, though, is that is the big goal, and in order to achieve it, you’ll have to figure out the small goals. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase “take baby steps.” That’s what setting goals is about. You see the big picture, and you take little steps to get there.

What would you do or be if you knew that absolutely nothing could hold you back? What if I told you, you *can* get there! Now I’m not saying that one day you’ll wake up and magically be there. You have to truly want it and work hard for it. At first, the big goal may not always seem like something that’s possible. That’s why we set the smaller, more attainable goals. There are two main parts to big and small goals: setting them and achieving them.

Goal Setting

Everything you're reading in this book is part of your first steps: all of this talk about spaces, time management, and taking action. You've started to achieve those small goals as you've done the activities in this book. While all of that is great, you're going to want to set some goals to keep you motivated. Let's look at what setting those goals might look like.

It's important to think about the big picture, what are those long – term goals you want to set? Making all A's, being 1st chair in band, being in the NBA or NHL? The phrase "long-term" can mean different things for different people. For some, a long-term goal could mean making A's for the school year. Their short-term goals would be making A's each quarter/ semester. Their steps towards those goals would be writing in their planner, doing their homework to the best of their ability, and staying on top of their work. For others, their long-term goal could be to play in the NFL. Their short-term goals would include: making the junior varsity team, making the varsity team, being a starter on the varsity team, playing in college, and so on.

An important thing to remember about goals is that they take time to achieve. You can't set a goal to make all A's or to be the best at your sport and expect that to happen overnight. Yes, some people are *discovered* overnight, or become an "overnight sensation," but they were working hard long before that moment. You should follow their example so that when you have your moment you are ready to continue working to your potential.

Achieving Your Goals

Before we talk a lot about achieving your goals, I want to address a question that I'm sure has already come to your mind: What happens if I don't achieve my goal? First thing you need to know: IT'S OKAY! Go back to the beginning of this chapter and look at the quote. No... seriously, go look. Even if you reach for your goal and don't get there, you've accomplished

more than you would have if you hadn't tried. You can still reach your larger, long-term goals, but maybe not in the timeframe you originally set. Some of the best advice I ever received was to do my best. Stop rolling your eyes; I know you've heard it multiple times. Like I've said before, I would not repeat it if it wasn't important. The thing is, if you do your best, and I mean really give it your all, and you still don't get there—you tried. It's better to do something and fail, rather than never to have tried at all and always wonder what you could have done.

There is also something important to note about the word "fail." It doesn't have to be as negative as everyone makes it out to be. There are two different kinds of fails: a Good Fail and a Bad Fail. A Good Fail is when you have tried your hardest and you're still not achieving your goals. A Bad Fail is when you didn't try as hard as you could have. Don't get me wrong, the Bad Fails can happen—been there, done that. Don't beat yourself up the first time it happens. Sure, it's not going to feel great, but it's a great opportunity for self-evaluation. Why didn't you try your best? Did something get in your way? No matter what, the best thing to do is try again. The first time a Good Fail happens, it really stinks. To me, it felt worse than a Bad Fail. It meant that I really tried my best, and my best didn't get me where I wanted to go. Over time, however, I realized that that didn't have to stop me from trying because, while I may have not achieved my big goal, I made it through all of the smaller ones (and they were usually things I didn't know I could do).

Now that we've covered that, what about when you do achieve your goals? Good! Celebrate a little bit, and make some new goals! Now, when I say celebrate, I mean celebrate appropriately. If your goal was "don't drink sodas for a year," then it's probably not a good idea to celebrate by drinking a whole 2-liter bottle of soda. Likewise, if your goal was "make all A's this school year," then you don't want to celebrate by not putting in

as much effort the next year. Buy yourself your favorite candy bar, or that game you've been saving to get, or ask whoever is in charge of the meals to cook your favorite dish!

While the celebration is great, the most important part of achieving your goals is setting the new ones and starting the cycle again! That's right, goals are a bit of a rinse and repeat situation; once you finish one, move on to the next one using the same process. Set the big, long-term goal, then set the smaller goals, and get your celebratory reward in mind too.

Recap

Setting goals is important, but those goals are not your end all be all. Yes, work towards them, but if you don't get there the first time, get back up and try again. Make sure to figure out why you're not reaching those goals so that you can continue to improve and reach your full potential.

Remember:

- Set your goals.
- Set small goals to help you towards your larger goals.
- Remember to keep trying, no matter what.

Activity 5.1: Setting Goals

Write down at least one long-term goal you want to achieve in the center of the concept map, then write at least 4 short-term goals that could help get you there. Don't forget to add in what you want your reward to be when you get it done!

Here was mine when I was first starting to put all of this together:

Write your goals here:

Long-term goal: _____

Short-term goals:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

Reward: _____

Chapter 6: Encouragement

Let's go back to your favorite movie star again. Most stars have their group of friends and family that keeps them grounded and responsible. They have a hair stylist/ make-up artist, a manager, an assistant, their best friend, and their parent(s). To put it simply: encouragers are a group of people you trust to keep you on track. These are the people you trust to tell you what you *need* to hear in a loving manner.

Why does this matter?

Even though we all like to think we've got everything figured out and we can handle it, as I like to say, we can't do it alone. We all need some kind of support system. My encouragers were the most unlikely people. Like I said, these people tell you what you *need* to hear. I had a tutor, my mom, and a team of several 6th grade teachers who made sure I reached my potential; they didn't let me get away with not turning in homework, they pulled me aside when they could tell I hadn't worked my hardest, and they celebrated the small things with me. Did I like when they called me out for not having my homework done? Absolutely not. There were days I would cry I was so mad. There were even days when my tutor would call my mom for an impromptu conference, and believe me – those were not good days. When they all came together and told me that my best option was to repeat 6th grade, you can imagine my reaction. However, over time I realized, that if they hadn't pushed me, who would have? I certainly wouldn't have pushed myself. I thought I had it under control, and I didn't.

There will be people in your life, teacher, parents, and others who will push you to do your best. They are the people you want in your life to encourage you. It's important to note that encouragers are not bullies. Encouragers will not push you to do your best for *their benefit*, but for your own benefit. Yes, believe it or not, doing that algebra homework is for your benefit, and

you should probably turn it in on time. So no, that teacher making you work so hard on that one project who is constantly telling you “You can do better,” isn’t saying that to hear himself or herself talk. They genuinely think that you can do better than what you turned in. THAT’S A COMPLIMENT! They hold you to a higher standard than what you realized and they care about you enough to tell you that they will not accept anything other than your best effort. Again, these are the people you want to surround yourself with.

Recap

Though it may not always seem like it, those who continually hold you accountable and push you to work to your fullest potential are the ones you should look to for encouragement. Encouragement won’t always be warm and fuzzy. It may come across as tough love. Remember to receive it well and learn from it. Your encouragers are helping you achieve your goals and only want the best for you.

Remember:

- There are people who will push you to do your best.
- They will push you because they care.
- Show them you care.

Activity 6.1: Who are your encouragers?

Go ahead and think of 1-3 people that you would consider your entourage and write their names down. Remember these are people who encourage you, guide you, and hold you accountable.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Activity 6.2: Thank them!

I imagine your encouragers don't always know that you appreciate their efforts. Take a moment to thank them for what they do.

Finale: aaannndddd scene.

Take a deep breath.

Congratulations! You finished the book! Before you go off, throw it away, and never open it again, take a second and think through what you have read.

You learned about the importance of keeping all of your academic *spaces* organized. You learned about *time* management. You learned that it is your responsibility to put all of this information into *action*. You learned that there are different kinds of *goals*, and that each small step gets you one step closer to achieving those goals. Lastly, you learned that surrounding yourself with people who truly care about you and who will *encourage* you is a crucial part of surviving middle school—and surviving life in general.

Notice, this book is called *STAGE*. It is a multi-purpose title. The title helped me with all of the anecdotes and illustrations throughout the book. It also helped me give you an acronym to help you remember all of the things we talked about in this book—because there were quite a few: Space, Time, Action, Goals, and Encouragement. I would not have tried to make this memorable if I didn't think it was important for you to know. I also would not have taken the time to write this if I didn't think it was important for you to know. Each topic you read through *will* be applicable to *you* throughout middle school and throughout life.

Recap

Normally, I provide you with a recap, but for this final activity, I want you to create your own recap. You may have already tried to look for the bullet pointed recap, realized it wasn't

there, and put the book down for good. If you're still reading, a thousand points for you! Before you completely put this down. Take a second and write down what you think the most important point was from each chapter. There is no right or wrong answer. Although, I have already done the first one for you, these are the points that *you* found important.

- Introduction: I wrote this book for *you*.
- Chapter 2: Space: _____

- Chapter 3: Time: _____

- Chapter 4: Action: _____

- Chapter 5: Goals: _____

- Chapter 6: Encouragement: _____

Now you're done!

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