

Helping Students Learn[®]

HIGH SCHOOL

Tips Families Can Use to Help Students Do Better in School
Cumberland County Schools



January 2026

Share strategies for success on essay tests and in-class writings

Writing well in a limited amount of time is a challenge for most students. Success starts with learning how to organize thoughts and express them effectively.

Encourage your teen to use this five-step process:

- 1. Think about the words** in the question. If it says:
 - *Discuss*—make fact-based observations about the topic.
 - *Describe*—give specific details about the subject matter.
 - *Show*—state a position and support it with facts.
 - *Explain*—provide factual causes or steps leading to a result.
- 2. Take a few minutes to jot down notes** about the topic and organize them into a rough outline. Often, these notes can become topic sentences for paragraphs.
- 3. Write an introduction** that briefly explains what the writing will be about. Use the *third person* point of view unless told to use something else.
- 4. Write the body of the essay.** Each paragraph should focus on one specific part of the question. Your teen should start with a topic sentence that makes the point and then supply information that supports it.
- 5. Write the conclusion.** Restate the overall position and summarize how the points support it.



Set boundaries that allow room for independence

Teens need opportunities to make choices and live with the results. But they can't handle every choice, and that's where you come in. Set rules that allow your teen to think independently—within limits. For example, your teen can decide *when* to study, but not *whether* to study.



Inspire your teen to strive

A strong work ethic—that includes reliability, dedication and pride in doing quality work—will serve your teen well in school and in the workforce. To cultivate it:

- **Set an example.** Display a positive attitude about work and show your teen that you take your job and responsibilities seriously. When the going gets tough, talk about how you will persevere.
- **Insist that work** comes before play. Expect your teen to finish the first draft of the paper *before* logging in to play online games with friends.

Instill a taste for geography

Some teens think the only geography they need to know is how to use a map app. But geography is about more than where places are. It's about people and how location affects life in a place, and also how different places compare to and affect one another. To build geographic interest and skills, have your teen:

- **Explore a world of food.** Your teen can try different countries' cuisines and research why certain ingredients and cooking methods are used.
- **Map social connections.** Where do your teen's social media friends and followers live? Are they concentrated in particular areas? Why might that be?



Suggest some learning resolutions

How is your high school student doing so far this year? Are learning and performance where your teen—and you—would like them to be? If not, encourage your teen to take part in a January tradition: making resolutions.

Here are a few resolutions that support academic achievement:

- **I will get to every class** on time and be ready to learn. Being timely and prepared ensures your teen won't miss important information. Teachers don't have time to reteach material every time a student is absent or late.
- **I will read for pleasure** every day. Pleasure reading strengthens

teens' writing skills, comprehension, fluency and more. But in a recent national report, only 14 percent of young teens reported reading for fun daily.

- **I will seek help** right away if I am struggling. Your teen should ask the teacher about ways to get clarification or extra help.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1971-2023 Long-Term Trend Reading and Mathematics Assessments.



Would changing to a higher level class make sense?

Q: Tenth grade math is turning out to be easy for my teen. My student likes getting high grades without having to work hard and thinks they'll look good on college applications. But I think switching to a more challenging class would be better. What should we do?

A: Before doing anything, you need more information. Make an appointment for yourself and your student with a school counselor to discuss factors that will help you make appropriate choices. These include:

- **How the classes fit** with your teen's goals. Will the current class prepare your teen for an advanced level math class next year? Will your teen be able to enter college with skills required to pursue studies of interest?
- **Your teen's academic record.** It's true that colleges look for high grades. They also prefer to see them in rigorous courses. How are the rest of your student's grades?
- **Workload balance.** Is your teen taking several demanding classes? If so, the current math class may offer needed balance. If your teen is coasting, a higher level class may be beneficial.
- **Logistics.** Is it possible for your teen to switch math classes and keep the same class schedule otherwise? Is it possible for your student to try a harder class and change back if it is overwhelming?



Are you reinforcing time management?

High school students have schedules full of classes, jobs and other activities. They need strong time management skills to fulfill responsibilities. Are you helping your teen learn to manage time effectively? Answer *yes* or *no* below:

- ___ **1. Do you emphasize** the value of writing all academic and personal commitments on a calendar?
- ___ **2. Do you help** your teen set priorities and focus on doing what's most important first?
- ___ **3. Do you encourage** your student to create weekly schedules of times to study and do schoolwork?
- ___ **4. Do you teach** your teen to break big projects and tasks into smaller, more manageable steps?

- ___ **5. Do you demonstrate** strategies for your teen as you manage your own time?

How well are you doing?

More yes answers mean you are equipping your teen to manage time wisely. For each no, try that idea.

"Your future is created by what you do today, not tomorrow."

—attributed to Robert Kiyosaki

Discuss ways to decide

There is more than one way to approach making a decision. Discuss these styles of decision-making with your teen, then brainstorm together about situations when one style might work better than another:

- **Making a quick decision** based on available information and sticking to it.
- **Deciding quickly**, but staying open to other options if new information comes along or the first choice doesn't work out.
- **Collecting and evaluating** a lot of information, and imagining each possible solution's outcome before deciding.

Volunteering offers perks

Teens who volunteer can gain new workplace skills. They can learn how to organize others and work in teams.

They also tend to earn better grades. And when you volunteer with your teen, you get to spend time working toward a shared goal and see each other in new ways. Look for local opportunities of interest and choose a one-time activity. If you like it, make plans to return.



Source: *Volunteering: Indicators on Children and Youth*, Child Trends Data Bank.

Suggest setting daily goals

Teens can be pretty focused on their own wants. Here is a simple way to expand your teen's focus to include other things that matter. Each morning, ask your student to spend a few minutes setting three goals for the day. Call them the three S's:

- 1. School.** What's the most important thing your teen can do that day for school? Finish a project? Ask a question?
- 2. Self.** How can your teen boost personal well-being? Exercise? Go to bed early?
- 3. Someone else.** How could your teen help someone else that day?

Helping Students Learn[®]

Published in English and Spanish, September through May.

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin.

Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.

Editor: Alison McLean.

Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.

Copyright © 2026, The Parent Institute[®],

a division of PaperClip Media, Inc.

P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474

1-800-756-5525 • www.parent-institute.com