

5 Secrets to Succeeding in Online Courses

by **Jenny Lane**



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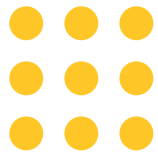


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5 Secrets to Succeeding in Online Courses

Introduction

Many individuals believe that if they cannot grasp an idea or concept quickly, they're not smart – a common misconception that must be thrown away. When you are tasked with learning something new, it can be challenging to jump in and get started. This is especially true when it's difficult to see the connections between an action and an outcome. A student seeking a degree in English may not want to enroll in a math course, for example. But by creating value between what you're learning now and how that connects you to where you want to be, you make your learning meaningful – an essential ingredient in the successful student's skill set.

And the good news is: **You are designed to learn.**

The successful learner is not necessarily any “smarter” or “more gifted” than anyone else. The successful learner simply knows how to learn. This eBook demystifies the learning process by offering you five key strategies of successful learners. These strategies have been tested by learning experts, and if you apply them to yourself, you will enhance your own learning process. By learning how to learn, you will uncover the behaviors necessary to achieve your own goals, plans, and ambitions – ultimately resulting in your own student and personal success.

Ready to get started?



All You Need is Grit

We often associate classroom learning with a person's "smarts." But intelligence isn't the only factor influencing a student's likelihood of success. Learning and achievement is something that takes place over time through persistence and determination; it's not something that happens overnight. The successful student does not necessarily have a higher IQ or a better station in life than the struggling student. But the successful student is likely to demonstrate one major trait, and that is grit.

What is grit?

Angela Lee Duckworth, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, studies concepts like grit and self-control as predictors of academic success. Duckworth defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals....The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon."¹ In other words, the

“The more effort you put into learning a topic - in spite of setbacks and plateaus in progress - the more likely you are to succeed.”

¹Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087-1101.

more effort you put into learning a topic – in spite of setbacks and plateaus in progress – the more likely you are to succeed.

What makes someone gritty?

One of the best ways to foster grittiness is through a *growth mindset*. Students with a growth mindset know that their ability to learn is not fixed and that with perseverance they can succeed in their efforts to accomplish something new.

Stanford psychology professor Carol Dweck studied the effect of praise on students and found that praising kids for being smart rather than for their effort on a particular task often led these students to underperform in school. Students labeled as “smart” tended to opt out of more challenging work to preserve their image. In their minds, putting a lot of effort into something told others that they were not as smart as they had been labeled². These students were exhibiting a *fixed mindset*.

According to Dweck, students with a fixed mindset believe their talents are innate gifts, while students with a growth mindset believe their talents can be developed over time through hard work and persistence. Students with a growth mindset “tend to achieve more than those with a fixed mindset...because they worry less about looking smart and put more energy into learning.”³

²Bronson, P. (2007, August 3). How not to talk to your kids. New York Mag. Retrieved from <http://nymag.com/news/features/27840/>

³Dweck, C. (2016, January 13). What having a ‘growth mindset’ actually means. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/2016/01/what-having-a-growth-mindset-actually-means>

⁴Cunningham, J. A. (2017). Using traces of self-regulated learning in a self-paced mathematics MOOC to predict student success (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.

Gritty students succeed in online courses

These ideas certainly seem to hold true for students completing College Algebra and Problem Solving online through Global Freshman Academy. College Algebra and Problem Solving is aimed at helping students clear one of the most challenging hurdles on the path to success in higher education: math. And what we've discovered here at Arizona State University is that those students who practice consistently also successfully complete the course.

In fact, students who complete the course spend roughly twice as much time working than those who do not complete the course.⁴ These students aren't any smarter or more talented than their counterparts. What sets these students apart is their grittiness and their ability to endure the course, no matter how difficult the course becomes. These students ask questions, use course resources, and keep working. These students never give up.

How to get gritty

You might now be wondering just how gritty you actually are. Complete Duckworth's Grit Scale⁵ to find out! If you're not as gritty as you'd like to be, the good news is that you can grow your grit. But how?


⁵Duckworth, A. Grit scale. Retrieved from <https://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>

⁶Dweck, C. (2014, November). Carol Dweck: The power of believing that you can improve [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/carol_dweck_the_power_of_believing_that_you_can_improve

⁷Kizilcec, R. F., Perez-Sanagustin, M., & Maldonado, J. J. (2017). Self-regulated learning strategies predict learner behavior and goal attainment in Massive Open Online Courses. *Computers & Education, 104*, 18-33.

- **Change your story.** For example, instead of going into an online College Algebra course thinking “*Ugh! I’m just not a math person,*” instead think “*I am a hard worker, and I can learn this.*” Remain positive, and, as Carol Dweck would say, “harness the power of believing that you can improve.”⁶
- **It’s okay to get out of your comfort zone.** Push yourself to keep going when confronted with a new challenge. As an online learner, this means setting small goals for yourself and reaching them. Completing a difficult reading assignment or homework problem without giving up is a reasonable and attainable goal. Remember, every step counts.
- **Use self-regulated learning strategies** (we’ll talk more about this in the next chapter). Because online learners are not in a structured classroom, they have to remain self-directed. Employing strategies like goal setting and time management – and sticking to them – is key.⁷
- And finally, **do you know someone who’s exceptionally gritty?** Ask them for the secrets to their success! Find out how they’ve progressed from point A to B and plan to reach point Z. Talking with your peers can be great way to learn more about yourself and develop your skills.

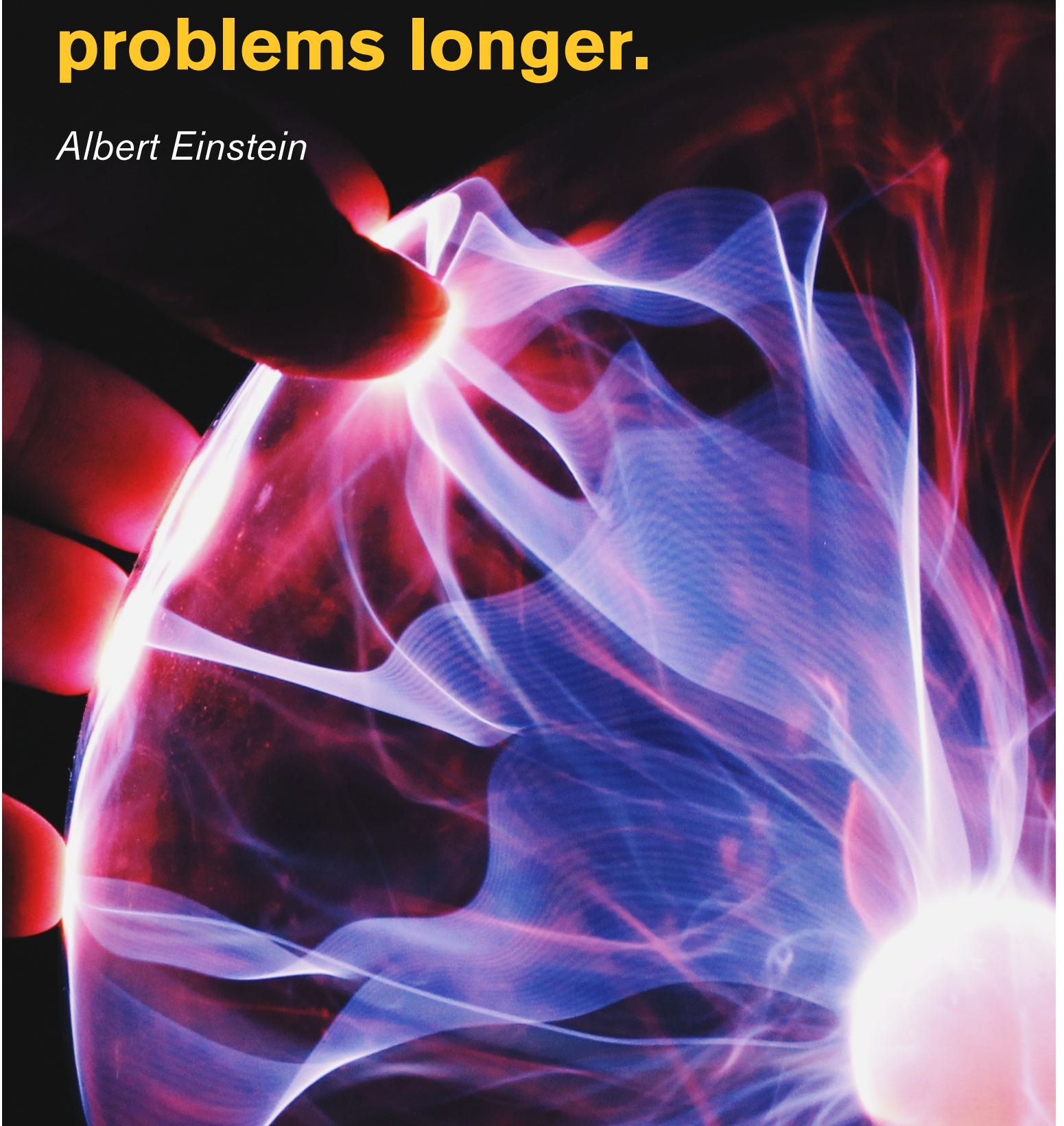
The bottom line: Persistent students are successful students.



Students who practice consistently also successfully complete their courses.

**It's not that I'm smart.
It's just that I stay with
problems longer.**

Albert Einstein



Become a Super Self-Regulator

In the previous chapter, you were introduced to the phrase *self-regulated learning*. Self-regulated learners have a desire to succeed and the determination to make it happen. Self-regulators have developed the skills and habits necessary to learn on their own. They use effective learning strategies to succeed, such as time management, goal setting, and strategic planning.¹

The good news is that we can all become effective self-regulators, and you probably already are a successful self-regulator in one way or another. You might excel as a goal setter, for example, but could work on scheduling in regular study time to help you meet those goals.

Self-regulators also take a proactive approach to their own learning. They guide themselves by setting goals, adopting strategies to reach their goals, and self-reflecting on their progress toward those goals. And it may come as no surprise, but self-regulators are more likely to succeed in their classes.² Much like learning a musical instrument, self-regulators put in the time to succeed by practicing

¹Kizilcec, R. F., Perez-Sanagustin, M., & Maldonado, J. J. (2017). Self-regulated learning strategies predict learner behavior and goal attainment in Massive Open Online Courses. *Computers & Education, 104*, 18-33.

²Zimmerman, B.J., (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learning: An overview. *Theory Into Practice, 41*(2), 64-70.

regularly, monitoring their growth, and advancing to the next set of material. Self-regulators are self-directed and motivated.

How can you become a better self-regulator?

First, you have to believe in yourself! Self-regulators demonstrate high academic self-efficacy – a belief in their own ability to achieve their academic goals. As you may have guessed, academic self-efficacy is linked to academic performance. In other words, college students who believe in their ability to succeed perform better than those students who are less confident in themselves.³

“ **Successful self-regulators take a proactive approach to their own learning.** ”

If you doubt your ability to succeed in college courses, programs like Global Freshman Academy can strengthen your self-efficacy. Global Freshman Academy meets you where you are in life – regardless of your previous academic history – so you can complete first-year college level courses – and succeed in every one of them. Because you only pay tuition after you pass your courses and are happy with your grades, you can build confidence in yourself without risking your GPA or wallet, all while making progress toward your degree.

³Chemers, M.M., Hu, L., & Garcia, B.F. (2001). Academic self-efficacy and first-year college student performance and adjustment. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 93(1), 55-64.

⁴Clear, J. (2017, June 6). How to build new habits by taking advantage of old ones. Retrieved from <http://jamesclear.com/habit-stacking>

Next, build helpful habits. It can take a few weeks to form a new habit. And you can do this with schoolwork. To get started, try “habit stacking,” the action of anchoring a new behavior to an old one.⁴ For example, let’s say you have trouble finding time in your day to read your textbook. Instead of putting your reading off until tomorrow, make a plan to read your textbook for fifteen minutes while you sip your morning coffee.

This tiny change in your routine will actually create a psychological connection between the two activities – reading your textbook while drinking your coffee – so that over time, you won’t even have to think about finding time to read: it will just be part of your day. You will have discovered the power of linking new habits to established routines, and you can continue building on this in whatever you set out to accomplish.

The bottom line: Believe in yourself and your ability to reach your goals.

The good news
is that we can
all become self-
regulators.



Mind Your Time



Finding a great place to study seems simple, but it's something many students don't prioritize. As an online student, it's up to you to create an environment that's conducive to learning. This means minimizing digital distractions by:

- Silencing your cell phone
- Switching off social media
- Closing unnecessary browser windows
- Turning off the television

Also work somewhere that's quiet and free of friends and family members who may be inclined to interrupt you.

How does your study space stack up? Take the [Where Should I Be Studying](#)¹ quiz to evaluate the quality of the three places you tend to study most often. Did your results surprise you? If so, you may need to work on identifying a more suitable study spot.

¹UTMB Health. Retrieved from <https://www.utmb.edu/caps/academic-success>

²Khalil, H., & Ebner, M. (2014). MOOCs completion rates and possible methods to improve retention - A literature review. *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications*, Chesapeake, VA: AACE, 1236-1244.

Now that you've assessed where to study, it's time to think about when to study.

Where does your time go?

You now know the importance of finding an ideal study space you can rely on. Another equally critical strategy is **effectively managing your time**. In fact, a major reason students cite for dropping out of online courses is that they don't have enough time.² And we get it: everyone's busy with school, work, family, and friends. But it is quite possible to strike a work/school/life balance by successfully managing your time. Setting aside time each day to work on your classes in a space that is free of distraction is crucial to your success as an online student.


Where does your time go each week? Take [this quiz](#)³ to find out how much time you have to study so you can more effectively plan your week. And here are a couple more time management tricks you can use every day:

- **Note your weekly assignments, goals, and exam dates** on a calendar, in a planner, or within a mobile app. This is a terrific way to visualize your tasks for the days ahead so you can plan accordingly.
- **Jot down micro-goals** to reinforce the larger ones; for example, if you know you have to work late, write down a mini-goal of reading your textbook after dinner that night rather than watching TV. If you have upcoming weekend plans, note on the Friday before that you will watch a course video or complete a homework assignment. In fact, scheduling daily activities by committing to goals and making respective plans facilitates successful time management.⁴

“**Setting aside time each day to work on your classes in a space that is free of distraction is crucial to your success as an online student.**”

³Virginia Tech. Retrieved from http://ucc.vt.edu/academic_support/study_skills_information/time_scheduling/where_does_time_go.html

⁴Oettingen, G., Barry Kappes, H., Guttentberg, K. B., & Gollwitzer, P.M. (2015). Self-regulation of time management; Mental contrasting with implementation intentions. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 45*, 218-229.

A photograph showing the silhouettes of three runners in profile, running from left to right on a track. The scene is backlit by a bright sun, creating a strong lens flare and a warm, golden glow. The runners are in mid-stride, and their shadows are cast on the ground. In the background, there are some structures and a stadium light tower.

**The only limit to
the height of your
achievements is
the reach of your
dreams and your
willingness to work
hard for them.**

Michelle Obama

Fix Your Focus

Unlike traditional classroom settings, where students participate in time-structured activities, online students are responsible for their own classroom engagement. This means as an online learner, you must rely on yourself to participate in classroom activities, complete coursework, and meet course deadlines, all while juggling your personal and professional lives.

Just take things one step at a time

Any individual, regardless of age, can struggle with setting and meeting goals that require self-discipline over a prolonged period of time. We all know someone who wants to improve their overall fitness and health. We also know that reaching weight loss goals can be challenging. Successfully completing online courses is a bit like sticking to a diet.

¹Duckworth, A.L., Grant, H., Lowe, B., Oettingen, G., & Gollwitzer, P.M. (2011). Self-regulation strategies improve self-discipline in adolescents: Benefits of mental contrasting and implementation intentions. *Educational Psychology*, 31(1), 17-26.

²Duckworth, A.L., Kirby, T.A., Gollwitzer, A., & Oettingen, G. (2013). From fantasy to action: Mental contrasting with implementation intentions (MCII) improves academic performance in children. *Social Psychology and Personality Science*, 00(0), 1-9.

³Oettingen, G., Barry Kappes, H., Guttentberg, K.B., & Gollwitzer, P.M. (2015). Self-regulation of time management; Mental contrasting with implementation intentions. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 45, 218-229.

- You have to **think positively**,
- **set goals for yourself**,
- and this is key – you have to **prepare for potential setbacks along the way**.

Students who set goals for themselves but also plan in advance how to reach their goals tend to be successful in achieving those goals. One trick is to use “if-then” plans to stay on track. ¹²³ For example, effective dieters may say, “*If I go out to dinner tonight, then I will order a salad.*” Similarly, a student enrolled in an online college course whose goal is to earn a final grade of A may say: “*If my friends text me to hang out this afternoon, then I will wait to meet up with them until after I’ve completed my problem sets for the day.*” Both the dieter and the student will be successful because they know what action they will take in the event of an obstacle along their goal path. These individuals understand the importance of taking things one step at a time as they work toward their goals.

“**Students who set goals for themselves but also plan in advance how to reach their goals tend to be successful in achieving those goals.**”

The bottom line: Focus on your daily tasks to avoid becoming overwhelmed by your larger goals.



Treat Yourself

Sometimes we need little rewards in our lives to keep us motivated. And neuroscience backs this: “[m]otivation is more than just willpower. It’s actually in your head.”¹ One way to stay motivated is to set small, achievable goals along with rewards after completing those tasks.^{2;3}

Treat yourself!

We all love receiving gifts or making daily tasks more enjoyable; for example, you might catch up on your favorite Netflix show while cooking dinner or listen to music while folding laundry. What you’re really doing is rewarding yourself as you work.

While earning your degree is in itself a long-term goal of succeeding in your classes, giving yourself smaller, more immediate rewards can have a positive effect on your performance. In fact, immediate rewards have been shown to increase persistence toward long-term goals,⁴ so don’t be afraid to treat yourself!

¹Rampton, J. (2017). The neuroscience of motivation. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2017/06/27/the-neuroscience-of-motivation/#cjPfQShzFaqS>

²Rampton, J. (2017). The neuroscience of motivation. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2017/06/27/the-neuroscience-of-motivation/#cjPfQShzFaqS>

³Service, O. & Gallagher, R. (2017). *Think small: The surprisingly simple ways to reach big goals*. London: Michael O'Mara Books Limited.

⁴Woolley, K., & Fishbach, A. (2016). For the fun of it: Harnessing immediate rewards to increase persistence in long-term goals. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 42, 952-966.

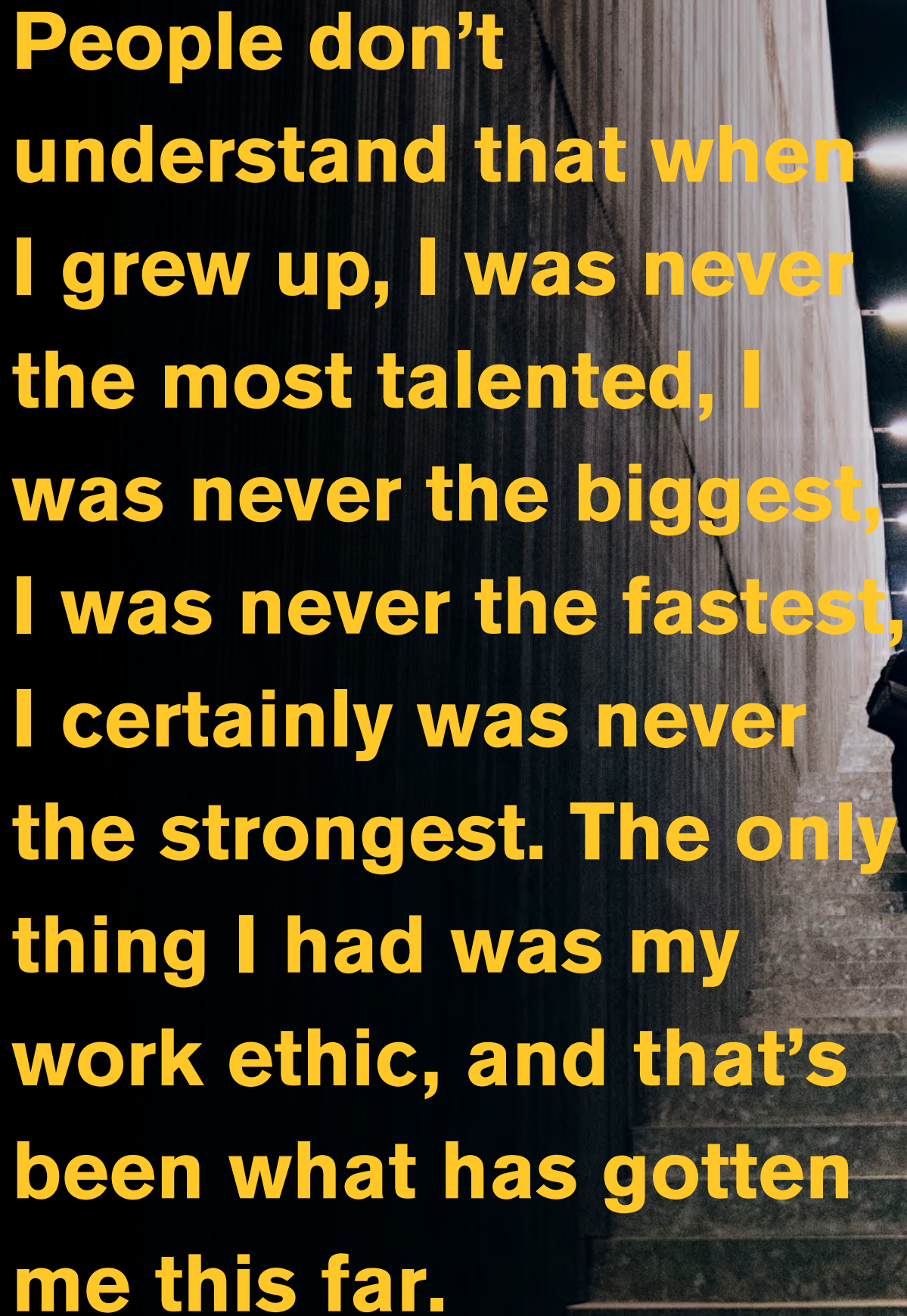
As you note your weekly assignments in your planner, you might also note a small reward you'd like upon completion of the task. Perhaps finishing an assignment in the morning will give you time to hike with your dog in the afternoon, or maybe you decide to order your favorite take-out after writing your class paper.

“ Giving yourself smaller, more immediate rewards can have a positive effect on your performance. ”

The bottom line: Treat yourself to success!



**Don't be afraid to
treat yourself!**



People don't understand that when I grew up, I was never the most talented, I was never the biggest, I was never the fastest, I certainly was never the strongest. The only thing I had was my work ethic, and that's been what has gotten me this far.

Tiger Woods