



WHITE PAPER · INTERNSHIP & PRACTICUM TRAINING

Supporting Learning, Literacy and Academic Success

Practical strategies for counseling supervisees working with clients who are struggling to learn

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Abstract. Academic struggle reaches the counseling room as anxiety, avoidance, school refusal, and damaged self-concept. Counselors are not tutors or educational diagnosticians, but they often have more time, more trust, and a clearer view of the person than anyone else involved. This paper sets out strategies a supervisee can teach within scope, organized around a single principle: humans learn what feels familiar, and almost everything useful we can offer works by building familiarity, lowering the cost of beginning, or enriching how material is encoded. Each strategy is given with practical instructions and the evidence behind it.

1. The organizing principle

Humans learn what feels familiar. Any strategy that builds familiarity ahead of formal learning will support comprehension, retention, recall, and the ability to apply what was learned somewhere new.

New information is encoded more readily when there is an existing framework for it to attach to (Ausubel, 1960), and material encountered before is processed more fluently on a second meeting. This is why a ten-minute preview changes what an hour of reading feels like.

It follows that most of what appears in this paper is not the learning itself. It is scaffolding placed around the learning so that it is easier to begin, easier to sustain, and easier to retrieve later. The active work still has to happen. But a mind that already recognizes the territory does that work far more efficiently.

Scope. Supervisees do not diagnose learning disabilities, administer educational assessments, or write instructional plans. They may teach study and self-regulation strategies, address the emotional layer, support a family through an evaluation or school meeting, and refer. Discuss any academic intervention in supervision before beginning it.

2. Look before you teach

A technique applied to an unexamined problem often fails for reasons that have nothing to do with the technique. Before offering a study strategy, check:

- Vision and hearing. Ask when they were last checked. You may be the first person to ask. A child who cannot see the board is not inattentive.
- Sleep. A student who is not sleeping will not retain what they study, whatever method they use.
- An undetected learning disability. Persistent difficulty that does not match the person's obvious intelligence deserves formal evaluation, not more effort.

- Anxiety about the subject itself. Math anxiety and test anxiety consume the working memory the task requires (Ashcraft & Kirk, 2001).
- What has already been tried. Someone told to "study harder" for three years needs something visibly different.

3. Approaching text: the pre-reading pass

A structured pass that costs about ten minutes and changes the experience of the real reading. It works on a textbook chapter, a journal article, a website, or a set of slides.

1. Read the title and subtitles. Say what it is about, aloud, in your own words.
2. Look at the structure — table of contents, chapter list, headings. This is the skeleton everything hangs on.
3. Find the summary. Abstract, chapter summary, conclusion, back cover. Read the ending first; this is not cheating.
4. Glance at the graphics. Authors put their most important relationships in pictures.
5. Skim physically. Two fingers on the page or screen, sliding down at a few seconds per page. Eyes casual and quick. Do not stop to understand anything.
6. Return a few days later and read properly.

Why the finger matters. It sets a pace and stops the eyes settling into reading. Clients who skim without it start reading a paragraph, feel they are not understanding, and give up. The instruction is physical because the discipline is physical.

This is an advance organizer constructed by the learner rather than supplied by a teacher (Ausubel, 1960). The return visit is not optional; the interval between passes carries much of the benefit (Cepeda et al., 2006).

Audio as a supporting layer

Text-to-speech will read almost anything aloud, and a client can record their own notes to play while driving, cooking, exercising, or falling asleep. Be precise about what this achieves. Active listening — following, pausing, answering back — is study. Background listening builds familiarity and reinforces material already learned. It does not replace active retrieval, and a student who listens passively and concludes they have studied will be disappointed.

- Recording in the client's own voice is better than a synthetic one; producing the summary is itself a learning act.
- Replay material already studied rather than new content.
- Pair audio with the eyes for clients who lose the thread in print alone.

4. Ways to motivate and optimize performance and time utilization

Most academic failure is not a failure of understanding. It is a failure to begin, and then to begin again. The methods below attack that from different directions. Teach one or two, not nine.

Method	What it is	How to do it
Pomodoro	Small waves of effort rather than an open-ended task.	Set a timer for a length the client will genuinely agree to — twelve minutes is often more honest than twenty-five. Stop when it sounds, even mid-sentence. Break. Repeat two to four times.
Timeboxing	A fixed period allocated to the task rather than working to completion.	"I will work on the essay from 4:00 to 4:40." The commitment is to the time, not the outcome. Useful where perfectionism means nothing is ever finished.
Implementation intentions	A decision made in advance, in the form when X, I will do Y (Gollwitzer, 1999).	Write it specifically: "when I get home and put my bag down, I will open my chemistry notes at the kitchen table for twelve minutes." Name cue, action, and place.
The five-minute rule	A dose so small that refusing it feels absurd.	"Five minutes, then you may stop." Mean it — the client must be genuinely free to stop or the technique stops being trusted.
The Zeigarnik effect	Unfinished tasks stay mentally active (Zeigarnik, 1927).	Stop mid-task rather than at a tidy ending. The open loop pulls you back and you resume with the thread in hand.
Behavioral activation	Action precedes motivation rather than following it.	Schedule the activity, do it at the scheduled time, let the feeling follow. Track what happened, not what was intended.
Spaced practice	The same time spread across days produces better retention (Cepeda et al., 2006).	Four twenty-minute sessions across four days, not eighty minutes the night before. Revisit older material briefly each time.
Retrieval practice	Testing yourself beats re-reading; among the strongest techniques reviewed (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006; Dunlosky et al., 2013).	Close the book and write everything you recall, then check. Flashcards, practice questions, explaining aloud. It should feel harder than re-reading — that is the mechanism.
Interleaving	Alternating related topics rather than completing one at a time.	Mix problem types in a set. Warn the client it will feel less satisfying than blocking, or they will abandon it.
Teaching it to someone	Explaining aloud forces organization and exposes gaps (Fiorella & Mayer, 2013).	Explain to a sibling, a parent, a pet, or an empty chair. Out loud, without notes. Whatever you stumble over is what to study next.

Be honest about the evidence. Spaced practice, retrieval practice, and implementation intentions rest on strong research. The Pomodoro Technique is a useful scaffold built on sound principles, but no study establishes twenty-five minutes, or twelve, as an optimal interval. Offer the structure; do not attach it to a number the evidence does not support.

5. Competence beliefs and mathematical confidence

A client who has decided they are "bad at math" is not making a neutral observation. They are describing a belief that governs how long they persist, whether they ask for help, and whether they attempt the problem at all. Self-efficacy influences outcomes substantially through those choices (Bandura, 1997).

Arguing with the belief rarely works. Showing the person evidence against it, drawn from their own life, works far better.

Body math

Before teaching any content, establish that the person is already mathematically competent. These are not morale exercises. They point at genuine mathematical cognition present before formal instruction and independent of it (Halberda et al., 2008).

Say this	What it demonstrates
Your eyes know which cookie is bigger.	Magnitude comparison, instantly, without counting
Your mind knows which bag of apples at the store is the better price.	Proportional reasoning and unit cost
Your mind knows which bowl has more apples in it.	Approximate number sense — quantity without counting
You carry a picture of two in your body — eyes, ears, hands, feet. And of ten, in fingers and toes.	Internal representation of number, always available
You can feel that one wait was longer than another.	Duration estimation and comparison

Then extend it into activities of daily living the person has already mastered that depend on these concepts — halving a recipe, judging whether there is enough money, working out whether they will arrive on time, splitting something fairly, seeing that a bus is too full.

The goal is a shift from *I am bad at math* to *I do math constantly and well; what I struggle with is a particular written notation*. That is a much smaller and much more workable problem.

Math anxiety and test anxiety

Both consume working memory the task requires. The person is not only frightened; they have less capacity available for the problem, which produces worse performance, which confirms the belief (Ashcraft & Kirk, 2001).

- Treat the anxiety as anxiety — regulation, graded exposure, and cognitive work on the belief.
- Reduce load: scratch paper, a formula reference, no time pressure in practice, permission to work slowly.
- Rehearse under conditions closer to the real ones once the person is ready.
- Separate two questions: do you know this, and can you show it under these conditions. Many clients have never been asked to distinguish them.

6. Multi-sensory encoding

An important distinction. This is not about identifying a client's preferred modality and teaching to it. The learning-styles matching hypothesis has repeatedly failed to hold up under testing (Pashler et al., 2008). The aim is to add sensory and creative channels of input for everyone, so more of the brain participates. Material encoded through several channels is richer, engages more regions working together, and offers more routes back to it later (Paivio, 1986; Mayer, 2009).

Visual

- Rebuild notes as a visual map — colored pens, highlighters, symbols, small labeled drawings. Drawing material rather than writing it produces notably better recall (Wammes et al., 2016).
- Use color systematically: one color per theme, per source, or per level of importance.

Tactile

- Write on paper laid over cardboard or a textured surface so the hand feels the writing.
- Write with crayons — different resistance, different feel.
- Use puffy ink for key notes, then run a finger over them while studying later.
- Physical counters — coins, cards, blocks, buttons — standing for concepts, moved by hand to show relationships.

Movement and balance

- Walk while reading or reciting. Stand rather than sit.
- Balance on one foot, stand on a pillow or wobble board, sit on a wobble cushion.
- Pace while explaining the material aloud.

Olfactory

- A distinctive fragrance during study — peppermint or eucalyptus — through oil, diffuser, gum, or mints.

Caution on fragrance. Essential oils are a common migraine trigger and a problem for people with asthma or scent sensitivity. Never introduce a diffuser into shared or clinical space without asking everyone present. Gum or a mint affects only the person who chose it.

Environmental cues and distributed review

Sticky notes. Writing on mirrors with a marker. Cards or objects left where they will be seen, placed in open spaces so material is reviewed mentally across the day rather than only at the desk. Two things are happening, and both are useful:

- Spacing in disguise. A note on the bathroom mirror produces repeated, low-effort retrieval at intervals — the mechanism that builds retention (Cepeda et al., 2006).
- Spatial structure. Objects arranged on a table make relationships visible in a way a list does not, and moving them engages motor and spatial processing alongside the verbal.

This is also the version of studying a client who cannot sit still will actually do.

Songs, poems, raps, and stories

Set the material to music or verse. Take a tune everyone already knows and replace the lyrics with the content. Turn facts, spelling rules, formulas, definitions, or dates into a rap or a poem. Melody and rhythm give material additional structure to attach to, and rhyme constrains what can come next — which is why people retain song lyrics they never set out to memorize. Sung material can be recalled better than spoken material under some conditions (Ludke et al., 2014).

- The client writes the lyrics, not the clinician. Generating the material is where most of the benefit sits.
- Use a tune they already know so the melody is automatic and the effort goes into the content.
- Silly is fine. Distinctive and absurd material is easier to recall, and the laughing does useful work of its own.

- Stories work the same way for sequences and processes — give the steps characters and a plot.

A note on published songs. Rewriting the words to a well-known song privately with a client is ordinary practice. Publishing, printing, or distributing rewritten lyrics to a copyrighted song is a different matter. For anything Orchard hands out or posts, use public-domain tunes or original melodies.

7. Graphic organizers

A graphic organizer is not decoration and it is not a summary. It is a structure that makes a relationship visible — a hierarchy, a sequence, a comparison, a cause. Concept and knowledge maps produce reliable gains in retention and transfer across a wide range of settings and ages (Nesbit & Adesope, 2006).

The single most important rule. The client builds it. A completed organizer handed over is just another page to read. The construction is where the learning happens, because you cannot build one without deciding how the ideas relate.

Match the shape to the information

If the information is...	Use	What it looks like
A hierarchy — categories and subcategories	Tree or web	Central idea with branches splitting outward
A sequence — steps, stages, history	Flow chart or timeline	Boxes connected by arrows in one direction
A comparison — two or more things	Matrix or Venn diagram	Grid with features down the side; or overlapping circles
A cycle — repeating process	Circular diagram	Arrows in a loop with no beginning or end
Cause and effect	Fishbone or chain	Factors feeding into a spine toward an outcome
A concept with many attributes	Frayer model	Box quartered into definition, characteristics, examples, non-examples
An argument — claim and support	Claim-evidence map	Claim at the top, evidence branching below

Building one with a client

7. Ask what kind of information this is. Steps? Categories? A comparison? The answer chooses the shape, and the question itself teaches something.
8. Get the pieces out first — one idea per sticky note or index card. Do not organize yet.
9. Arrange them physically. Move the cards until the arrangement feels right. Expect disagreement; that argument is the learning.
10. Draw the connections, labeling each with the relationship: causes, requires, contradicts, is an example of.
11. Transfer it to paper in color, with symbols and small drawings.
12. Use it for retrieval — cover it and rebuild from memory. This is where it stops being craft and becomes study.

Two dimensions and three

Two-dimensional	Three-dimensional
Concept maps and mind maps	Foldables — term outside, definition beneath the flap
Flow charts and timelines	Flip books for sequences, one stage per page
Comparison matrices and Venn diagrams	Card sorts laid out and rearranged on a table

Two-dimensional	Three-dimensional
Frayer models for vocabulary	Objects standing for concepts, grouped and moved
KWL charts — know, want to know, learned	String and pins on a board to show connections
Annotated diagrams with the client's own labels	Stacked cups or boxes for hierarchies that come apart

Three-dimensional versions earn their place with clients who need movement, with younger children, and with anyone who finds a blank page intimidating. Building something is a lower barrier than writing something.

8. Learning contracts and success charts

Execute an academic or learning success contract with the client. The value is not the paper. It is that vague intentions become specific, observable commitments, and that progress becomes visible rather than merely felt.

What makes an indicator usable

- Observable. "Study more" is not an indicator. "Four twenty-minute sessions a week, logged" is.
- Within the client's control. Track the studying, not the grade. Failing at something uncontrollable teaches helplessness.
- Frequent enough to notice. Weekly beats per-semester; progress a person cannot see does not motivate.
- Few. Three or four. A contract with twelve indicators is a wish list.

What the contract contains

- The goal, in the client's own words
- Three or four measurable key performance indicators
- How and when progress is recorded
- Who else knows — parent, teacher, supervisor
- What happens when it is met, named in advance and chosen by the client
- What happens when a week is missed — also named in advance, and free of shame
- A review date

Name the reinforcer before you start. A reward decided afterward is a consolation prize. A reward named in advance is something to work toward, and it should be chosen by the client rather than by the adult.

The success chart

- Track the behavior, not the outcome. A row filled in for studying is within reach every day; a row that fills only when grades improve will sit empty for weeks.
- Make it physical and visible — wall, fridge, or a notebook opened daily. Not an app they will stop opening.
- Let the client decorate it. Ownership matters more than neatness.
- Review it together each session. A chart nobody looks at stops being filled in.
- A missed day is data, not failure. Adjust the plan rather than the person.

9. Foundations: how a person lives

A student who cannot concentrate is often a student who is not sleeping. The instinct is to reach for a study strategy, but a technique applied to a sleep-deprived brain will not hold. Check the foundation before teaching technique.

Foundation	Why it matters for learning
Sleep — quality, length, REM, deep	Memory consolidation happens during sleep. Studying without sleeping afterward wastes much of the effort (Rasch & Born, 2013).
Circadian rhythm	Regular timing governs sleep quality, alertness, and when demanding work is possible at all.
Morning sunlight	Light early in the day is the strongest lever on circadian timing, and therefore on sleep.
Fresh air	Stuffy rooms and rising carbon dioxide dull concentration. Open a window before studying.
Adequate protein	Supports steadier energy across a session than carbohydrate alone.
Balanced blood sugar	A crash takes working memory and mood with it. Many an afternoon attention problem is a blood sugar problem.
Movement and exercise	Supports attention, mood, and sleep quality. Short bouts before study are often enough.
Socialization	Isolation worsens mood and motivation. Studying alongside another person helps many students begin.
Play and leisure	Rest is when consolidation and insight occur. A student with no leisure is not studying more, only worse.
Orderly environment	Visual clutter competes for attention and raises the cost of beginning.

Stay within scope. Discuss these as general principles. Supervisees do not prescribe diets, set calorie or macronutrient targets, or write exercise programs — and take particular care where disordered eating may be present. Where sleep, nutrition, or a medical concern is significant, refer.

10. Sensory processing, school, and formal accommodations

When one channel is overloaded

For clients with sensory processing differences the aim shifts. In section six we were adding channels to enrich encoding. Here we are finding a route that works when one channel is costly or unreliable.

- Eyes following along while listening, so the channels support rather than compete.
- An audio recording where print is effortful.
- Reorganizing into a chart, map, or graphic organizer where continuous prose is hard to hold.

Read the direction the client needs. Someone overwhelmed by sensory input needs fewer channels and a quieter environment, not peppermint and a wobble cushion. Adding stimulation to an overloaded system makes things worse. Work out which way the person tips before choosing a strategy.

A learning plan for a hard subject

- Get a second textbook. A student who is stuck often understands the subject and does not understand one author's explanation of it. A different explanation frequently unlocks what more hours on the same page will not.
- Sometimes a printed textbook is what is missing, particularly for a student working only from slides.
- Find instructors known for teaching that subject well. Watch two or three and pick whoever suits this client.
- Build targeted playlists — pre-study before class, review after, reinforce before the exam. Same material, three exposures, spaced.
- Study groups where the client explains rather than listens.

- A practical caution: autoplay and the recommendation sidebar are where study time disappears. A saved playlist opened full screen keeps a student on the material.

Preview access as a documented accommodation

For a student with an identified learning difficulty, the familiarity principle can be secured institutionally rather than left to willpower. Early access to the curriculum — typically two weeks ahead — can be documented as an intervention within a Section 504 Plan or an IEP. The student previews the topic, concepts, and vocabulary before the class meets and arrives already familiar with the territory.

This is the difference between telling a struggling student to read ahead and obliging the school to supply the material so that they can.

Working with the school

- Other accommodations resting on the same principles: extended time, a reduced-distraction setting, audio versions of texts, notes or slides supplied in advance, permission to record lectures.
- Your role in a meeting is to describe what you observe and support the family — not to recommend educational placement or to diagnose.
- Prepare the parent beforehand. That preparation is often worth more than your presence on the day.
- Specific observations recorded over time carry more weight in a school meeting than general impressions.

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Verify before you rely. This paper summarizes a broad literature for practical use. Check a primary source before citing it in an academic context, and raise anything you intend to use with a client in supervision first.