Student Survival Guide: how to NOT fail this course

The most important single idea: when you have questions, **ASK**!

Follow instructions

Read course materials carefully… you can't follow instructions if you don't know what they are.

If you don't understand the instructions, ask your course instructor for clarification.

Do not make assumptions about what the instructions mean.

Do not assume another student's interpretation of the instructions is correct.

Start working early so you have time to seek clarification.

Pay attention

Woody Allen said "80 percent of success is showing up.", which is stupid. But, if you don't show up you will not succeed.

Do not believe you can multitask. You cannot. No matter what you want to believe, you cannot multitask. (Read *A Deadly Wandering* if you want a good rendition of recent research results directed towards the phenomenon of human attention.)

The bottom line is that (almost no) humans have the capability to perform two attention-demanding tasks at the same time without suffering a severe loss of performance. The human brain did not evolve such capabilities. This is ample evidence from neuroscience to back statement that up.

Multitasking is a technique that allows you to perform several tasks simultaneously, poorly and ineffectively.

If you come to class, pay attention. If you are working on your laptop (as opposed to taking notes on your laptop), you are not paying attention to what's going on in class, and you will not know what you have missed until it's too late.

There are studies that indicate that the act of writing down information (taking notes by hand) actually improves your retention of that information.

If you are working on an assignment, focus on it. Eliminate distractions while you are working.

Leave notes to yourself, e.g., comments in your code about issues that still need to be examined, so that if you need to interrupt your work, you won't lose track of your plans.

Observe deadlines

If you are given a due date for something, keep track of it.

Know what the rules are regarding late submissions. Sometimes there will be a grade penalty for turning an assignment in late. Sometimes late submissions will receive no penalty. Sometimes late submissions will simply be discarded and not graded. You don't get to decide what the policy will be. You do get to deal with it.

Observe submission requirements

Know how to submit your work. This might involve Scholar, or email submissions, or some web-based submission system, or something else.

Know what format is required for your work. If a paper (or code) is required to be formatted in a certain way, do that. If an electronic submission is required to be made using a particular file type, do that.

Expect nonconforming submissions to be cheerfully ignored (and assigned a score of 0). There are many of you, and few of us, so we will not take time to give a nonconforming submission any special treatment.

Do all the assignments

In most courses, each assignment is designed to play some important role in developing your understanding or your skills. If you skip an assignment, even if it's not given much weight in the final grade, it's likely that you will struggle with some later assignments or test questions.

Every semester, I have a small number of students whose averages might have been high enough to pass a course if they had simply turned in mediocre efforts on one or more assignments.

Take advantage of every allowed resource

Do the reading assignments for the course. In many cases the readings are intended to supply you with more information than can be presented in class.

If you decide to skip class, you've decided to teach yourself the course material. If you can do that, fine. If you are struggling at all in the course, you probably cannot teach the course to yourself.

Take advantage of office hours to ask questions. The TAs and course instructors hold office hours so you can get information and clarifications, but that won't happen unless you take advantage.

Make use of software tools, like gdb and valgrind. The pros use these for a reason.

Observe Honor Code requirements

Are you allowed to work with other students? If not, don't.

Are you allowed to incorporate code you did not write? If not, don't. If so, what are the restrictions?

Are there restrictions on other resources, such as books or websites? Just because you can Google and find something does not mean you can honestly make use of it.

If the restrictions are not clear, ask your instructor to clarify things!

It's much easier to face getting a bad grade (and perhaps explaining that to friends, parents, potential employers) than to face explaining an Honor Code conviction.