Many years ago, ICSE declared that it was required for every 10th grade Indian student to take an exam which was given the formal name of “The Board Exam”, and I, coming under this category, was one of the lakhs of students all over India to spend one year rigorously preparing for it. For me, the story had a (very) happy ending. I surpassed my aim of 97% and got 98.2%, topping my school, my city, my state and South India. Hariharan Sir asked me to share a ‘how I did it’...so here goes!

I started off the first month or two of preparation with a vengeance. I hardly took breaks, I woke up early and studied, I studied in the bus, I revised till late night - I wanted to give my best to this exam. However, after a couple of weeks of rigorous studying, I started to feel disinterested in putting in all the effort. I knew I had to make some changes. If I continued this way, pretty soon I would suffer a burnout, every ICSE student's nightmare. I began to tackle ICSE one day at a time. I made daily to-do lists, which I stuck onto my watch. That way, every time I looked at my watch, I would be reminded of my list of things that needed to be completed.

My room was divided into specific parts; there was a separate spot for after-school studying, a spot for early morning studying, a spot for night-time studying and a spot for books. Now I separated out a new spot - one for self-motivation. It consisted of simply a corner, a mat and a concentration picture. I would sit there and motivate myself by reminding myself of the target, whenever I felt tired of the continued effort, and as weird as it may seem, it really helped.

Another one of my unusual ways of learning was little sticky-notes. I put formulae and other important facts that I had to memorize on Post-its and stuck them all over my house, on the stairs, walls, dining table and all over my room. Every time I passed by them, the information would get reinforced in my memory. Every step of the staircase had a line of the poem that I was supposed to memorize.

I was well aware of the importance of effective time management. I always felt capable of handling the workload as long as I was on or ahead of my schedule. Another thing I had on Post-its all over my desk was schedules – monthly schedules, daily schedules and even a countdown to the final day. If I was on track, I was not stressed or overwhelmed with the amount of work. Through daily updating of schedules I managed to keep stress levels to a minimum.

However, I do remember one month being particularly taxing - I had to balance student council elections, preparation for MUN, due project drafts and monthly tests. Overcome with stress, I flopped onto my (studying) couch and cried. My family was really supportive - they advised me to tackle tasks one at a time and pace myself. They then took me out for ice cream. I felt much better and I realized that it was, as everything is, just a passing phase and soon I had caught up with class and was back on schedule.

Although I did put most of my energies into preparing for the Boards, I made it a point to stay healthy. I ate healthy, went for PE, and slept not less than 10 hours a night. Sometimes, if we had a free hour, I would join my class for a game of football or Uno. I also
contested for the Student Council Elections, and went for an interschool tournament, during the year.

I am going to dedicate an entire paragraph to the contribution of sufficient sleep to my success, as I believe that I couldn’t have done as well as I did without my 10 hours of sleep a night! My mother has drilled into my head the importance of sleep. From a young age I have been taught to sleep early so now sleeping at 9 every night has become a habit. I find I am more productive and can think clearly when I have had a good night’s sleep. Even during my Board Exams I made it a point to manage my time well enough to sleep by 930 every night. I liked to study in the mornings the best, as at that time, I felt fresh and everything I read made sense. I always left tough concepts for the morning because I knew that the seemingly impossible theories would be uncomplicated the next morning.

Hindi was hands down the hardest subject for me. I owe my success in it to expert guidance and pure slog. I subscribed to Hindi magazines to improve my vocabulary. I read and reread all my textbooks. I downloaded Hindi songs onto my Mp3. I literally clung on to every Hindi word I heard or read. And the hard work really paid off, when I become proficient at India’s national language.

During my Dussehra holidays, I took a guilt-free vacation to Kerala to relax and rejuvenate. I came back relaxed and rejuvenated, and I found I was able to read the whole ICSE portion in 10 days! I really learnt the importance of relaxation time and allowing the brain some downtime.

During the Boards, I read through the whole portion of the subject, sometimes twice, before each exam. I managed my time well enough to be able to sleep by 9.30 every night. I felt that this helped me ace my exams. In the mornings I exercised, stretched and had a hearty breakfast. Right before each exam I would eat a cereal bar, try to relax and just focus on the aim. When I had read through the question paper, I would allot an approximate time for each answer. Fortunately, I was able to finish every paper, with some time to spare. Although I tried not to think about the previous exam after each one, I was unable to, so I just tried not to let it get in the way of the next exam’s studying.

However taxing they may have seemed at the time, the monthly tests, regular revision and two pre-boards really contributed to my success. Regular testing helped me in many ways. I learnt the paper formats, the importance of time management and neat presentation, examiners’ habits, the marking schemes and a lot of vital facts every ICSE student should be equipped with. It also cleared all doubts I may have had on the topics. Good test results gave me confidence in myself and inspired me to aim higher.

ALL my subject teachers were absolutely fabulous. I admit I did go for a few tuitions, just to leave no stone unturned. However, it was an eye-opener for me because I realised that I was getting all the explanations I needed in order to understand the concepts, from school, and I didn’t really need tuition. My teachers really made sure the class understood the concepts before moving on, which even though was a time-consuming process, was very helpful. If it wasn’t for their competence, guidance and support, I would not have been able to even dream of achieving what I did. So here goes…

Thank you Ugam Raj sir for being so enthusiastic about teaching us, for explaining the math concepts clearly and especially for helping me get the centum in math!
Thank you Vimla ma'am for your encouragement and for your optimistic nature, without which English might have been the most despised subject of 10th grade for me!

Thank you Arpita ma'am for teaching us Biology so well that 2 months after the Boards, I still remember the definition of 'Genetics' and the concept of cohesion! And thank you for teaching me that without daily effort, studying for the exams seems like a mountain you don't want to climb.

Thank you Mary ma'am, Indira ma'am and Sinduja ma'am, for your clear explanations of chemical terms and laws, without which memorising the entire chemistry textbook would have been an impossible task.

Thank you Jyothi ma'am for all the help, support, encouragement, faith, guidance and wonderful physics classes.

Thank you Lucy ma'am for being a great history and class teacher, for helping me achieve my maximum potential and for having faith in me and my abilities.

Thank you Sritama ma'am for teaching Geography so well and for giving us studying tips and techniques.

Thank you Srishti ma'am for being the best teacher of commercial applications an ICSE student could ask for.

And ‘Dhanyavad’ Geetha ma'am for expertly teaching us our national language, Hindi, and helping me get an overwhelming 98 per cent in it 😊

Thank you Inventre Academy for being the soil, water and sunlight, without which the flowers of Grade 10 ICSE could not have bloomed!

Trust me; there is no secret recipe for getting a 98.2%. Mine was a combination of self-motivation, hard work, competent teachers, a supportive family, and of course, sufficient sleep. 😊

By

Alisha Kalyanpur