

7th grade

Productive Use of the Summer

by
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One of the questions that competitive universities ask of applicants for admission is this: “How have you used your summer vacations?”

There’s a good reason for this. All other things being equal, the best predictor of future success is past success. “Potential” is just for children; as you grow older, people increasingly judge your maturity and sense of responsibility by asking one key question: “How have you used your time?”

People in their mid- to late-teens may be divided into two groups.

- Some are more like children than adults. They are passive and short-sighted. They center their lives on present-day diversion and fail to plan more than a few days or weeks ahead. They see life as mostly play, and view time the way children see it, as a passive environment. They depend on adults to direct their lives and have little or no sense of self-directed action toward goals of personal accomplishment. If they have a job, they use it purely as a source of “spending money”—with no regard for its fitting into a long-term career strategy. At age 15 or 16, they still view the summer months the way they did in childhood: as an entitlement for mostly fun and games.

- Others are young adults. They see time as a non-renewable resource, something either *used productively* or just *wasted*. They set long-term goals (months and years ahead) and work now to accomplish them. They see their summer months as an opportunity to grow in learning, achievement, and practiced maturity. What they produce over the summer fits into an overall strategy for their life years from now, especially their later careers. They know that time-management is just another term for self-control, which is one sign of real maturity. They learn by practice how to get along effectively with responsible adults—and most especially those adults who can help them later in their careers. They are savvy young adults, men and women of action, people who will amount to something, starting now.

You can belong to this second group if you set your mind to it. Sooner or later you will have to compete with them anyway, so you might as well begin right now. You can start by using your summer months productively. The rest of this paper will show you how.

So, when you later must answer the question posed by colleges, you can have something substantial to report. Your answer will say a lot about your own maturity.

Summer job with a firm

Secure yourself a paying summer job, one that will teach you how to work well and manage your time effectively—and that may lead you to later (even better) summer employment and maybe even a career. If you can work for a firm in a field you’re aiming

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toward as a career (engineering, medicine, law, architecture), so much the better. But even work in a fast-food restaurant or supermarket can profit your growth in character and professionalism.

Bear some important matters in mind, facts of life often overlooked by people your age:

- Imagine a bull's-eye target with you at the center. Surrounding you is the circle of your friends and acquaintances. The next circle out is that of *their* friends, that is, people whom they know but you don't. That's where the jobs are. To land a good job, or build a good career, you have to work through people. The greater the number of people who esteem you, the better you will do. That's the way the world works.

- You've got to plan ahead and act ahead in order to get ahead. This means you should think and act to get a job months before the summer falls upon you. People with savvy and initiative start to line up a job in February and work at it for weeks. They beat out the competition—those passive, immature high-schoolers who wait until May or June to get moving, when it's too late. It's a law of life: people first in line get the best seats; people later in line get the worst seats; people at the end of the line don't get in at all.

- The ideal situation would be to work for a firm related to your professional interests and return to work with them, at increasing levels of responsibility, each summer through college. This may not be possible with your first summer job, but it's a goal to shoot for later. In any event, it would be a big plus if you could count on someplace that would like to rehire you each summer when you're in college, especially if you live away; it's hard to line up a fresh summer job back in your hometown when you're studying hundreds of miles away. So, think about long-term repeat summer employment.

- For this to happen, you need to favorably impress your boss during your first summer job. Remember, too, that even if you want to work elsewhere in the future, your future employers will want a reference from your present boss. So, work for your present employer in such a way that he'd be glad to recommend you later.

- What do bosses want most from teenage employees? It's *reliability*. Many young employees are notoriously unreliable. They show up late for work. They call in "sick" when something else comes up. They slack off when nobody's supervising them. In other words, they don't keep their end of the employment agreement—conscientious work in exchange for pay. None of these faults should be found in you, for you are a mature and reliable worker. Your boss should notice that you keep your word, you have a spirit of service, you're pleasant and well mannered to everyone, and you work diligently whether you're being supervised or not. If you're this kind of worker, your boss will notice and appreciate you. You've earned his respect.

- When you're nearing the end of the summer, give your boss ample notice and tell him the exact date for your last day. On the day you leave, thank him personally. Ask him if he'd like to rehire you next year; tell him you'll contact him in February. If you plan to work elsewhere, ask him if you can use him as a reference later.

How do you go about lining up your first job? Here's what experience indicates—

- Keep a file someplace where you store all papers related to your job search: notes about leads and references, gist of phone calls, addresses of people, copies of letters you send, and the like. It's a good idea to date these items. Also, of course, keep a

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calendar where you note deadlines and call-backs (see below).

- Before you start looking, ask three or four people who know you well if you may use them as references for your job search. That is, would they agree to recommend you to any prospective employer who calls them? (Everyone who knows you and your work would be glad to agree.) Then ask them for their title (e.g. English teacher, school principal, parish priest), address, and phone number. Type up a sheet with this at the top: “References for... (your name, address, and phone number)”—then your references’ names, titles, etc. Make photocopies of this, be prepared to give the sheet to a prospective employer when he asks you for references. Or, even better, offer the sheet yourself during your first meeting with whoever interviews you. Your prospective boss will probably be impressed that you handle yourself so maturely and professionally—a sign that you’d make a good worker.

- Sometime before February, ask among friends and acquaintances for leads. Get names and phone numbers of leads, and ask your friends if they can make an introduction.

- Call prospects and politely introduce yourself. Explain what you want. Ask if you can drop by to discuss. If prospects say it’s too early to hire summer people, say you understand but want to get things moving early. Ask when would be a good time to call back—mid-March, early April? (Already you’ve impressed your prospective boss.) Note what he says on your calendar. Call back at that time, offer to come in for an interview.

- Do whatever it takes to show up for the interview on time and fully prepared. This means dress your best; pay special attention to shirt, tie, and shined shoes. Have a pen with you to fill out any required application form; also have your Social Security number. Be prepared to tell him the exact date when you can start work, and offer him your sheet of references. Ask how soon you may expect to hear from him, or whether he’d prefer that you call back later. Writing him a personal thank-you note the next day is a nice professional touch.

- If you secure another job elsewhere, make sure you call your interviewer back promptly to tell him—so he’s free to hire someone else. Thank him for his time and interest. This is an important professional courtesy.

- When you get a job, call or drop a note to the people whom you used as references. Thank them for their help. They’ll be happy for your good fortune and pleased with your thoughtful courtesy.

Self-employed summer job

If you’re too young or too busy to get a full-time job with a firm, you can go into business for yourself. People in your neighborhood probably need help for gardening, lawn-mowing, cleaning and fix-up. You can perform these services for cash. Here are some tips:

- Sometime in March, have a stack of business cards printed professionally. It should give your name, address, phone number, and kind of work you’re willing to do.

- Set your rates ahead of time. It’s a good idea to begin with hourly rates for new customers. Once you know each other, and you know enough to estimate time needed for each kind of task, you can then charge a flat rate. In any case, have your rates set when

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you approach prospective clients; one of their first questions will be how much you charge.

- Dress well and go door to door in your neighborhood. Introduce yourself politely, explain the kind of work you're seeking. Count on the fact that most people will initially decline or demur; they have other plans, or they'll say they want to think it over. No problem. Just thank them and leave your business card, saying you'd be pleased to hear from them later. Your goal here is just to leave the people with your card and a good impression of you. The calls will come in later. If you leave cards with 300 people and 5% of them later hire you, that's 15 jobs you've lined up. And if you do a good job for each of them, they'll spread the word among friends—which will lead to more jobs.

- Show up on time, every time. If you're unavoidably late, render an explanation and a sincere apology.

- Do the very best work you can. Work quickly but thoroughly. If you must enter the house for some reason, don't track in a mess and don't dawdle there. If you're on an hourly rate and take a few minutes for a break, don't count this break time in your billing.

- If you accept payment by check, have a copy of your business card ready so your client will spell your name right on the check. Carry sufficient change in \$1 and \$5 bills if your client wants to pay in cash.

- Respect your clients' privacy. If you're inside someone's home, don't even appear to be snooping around. If you see or overhear anything untoward, ignore it entirely and don't talk about it with anyone afterwards. In other words, never gossip about your clients. Professionals know how to respect people's confidentiality and mind their own business.

- Keep records of your income and expenses. Your parents can show you how.

- At the end of the summer, thank each of your clients. Offer to be available for any odd jobs they may have during the school year, such as shoveling snow. Bear in mind that one or more of your clients may later help you find leads for a steady summer job with a firm, maybe even their own. People aren't just judging your work—they're also judging *you*.

Social service project

There are plenty of organizations that help the needy in our society—disadvantaged minority kids, the elderly, immigrants, the infirm—and they welcome the volunteer help of generous young people like you. So, if you don't badly need summer earnings, or if you work only a part-time job, you could help with tutoring, coaching, and other forms of service. You could use your powers to benefit someone who needs you. Nearly everyone who does this says it's one of the most richly rewarding experiences they've ever had.

Reading and research projects

The idea here is to spend some time learning about a subject in some depth and entirely on your own initiative. This takes a lot of goal-setting and self-discipline. It's

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excellent practice for your work later in your chosen career.

If your school requires you to read certain books over the summer, approach your principal or dean of studies (whoever makes the decision) and propose an alternative reading or research plan, such as one of those below or one of your own devising. You may offer to write a short paper to submit to your English or history or science teacher in the fall, for extra credit if possible. Naturally you'll also have to get permission from the teacher involved. Please note: the more concrete and detailed you make your proposal, the greater the chances of its being approved. Detail is the difference between a realistic plan and a "good idea." Show that you're serious about this project.

Remember that dedicated teachers are favorably disposed to students' initiatives in undertaking intellectual work. Very strongly so. A school devises summer reading lists mostly to prod along those slothful students who'd otherwise waste the summer. You're the exact opposite. You want to read—but also to focus your efforts on learning something that's important to you. Teachers warmly approve this attitude, which is why you stand a good chance for having your alternative project approved.

Be prepared to compromise, though. They may require you to read half the books, and may not be willing to give extra credit until they read your final paper. So be it. Work out any kind of deal you can.

Think ahead, too. When you later apply to college, you will need to secure recommendations from the principal and two of your teachers. These people will need to cite in specific detail how you have shown initiative and quality in intellectual work. They will remember you, your initiative, and your project.

In any event, whether you finally receive formal extra credit for your work or not, here are some projects you might undertake:

- If you're already attracted to some career, arrange to interview several professionals and find out everything you can about that field. Parents and friends of your family could provide you with leads and introductions. Call and arrange to meet for lunch or after work, for no more than 45 minutes of their time. Have your questions ready: How did you come to work in this field? What do you most enjoy and dislike about it? What plan would you recommend to someone my age who's interested in your field? What prospects and challenges in the field do you foresee 20 to 30 years from now? What mistakes have you seen young people make in your field when starting off? What do you know now that you wish you'd known in high school?—Write up a summary of these people's observations. (Be sure to send a thank-you note to everyone. Who knows? One of these contacts may lead later to a good professional-level summer job.)

- Find out from professionals who were the outstanding innovators and leaders in their field. For instance, in architecture: Christopher Wren, Frank Lloyd Wright, Philip Johnson, I. M. Pei. Then read biographies of each. Note what strikes you, perhaps what they had in common, and write it up.

- Undertake to read two or three great works of literature by a famous author, one whose works you barely touch on in high school. In other words, study one great author in depth. For instance, read *Crime and Punishment*, *Notes from the Underground*, and *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, along with some critical explanations of Dostoyevsky's work. Or read *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. If you concentrated on one author for two summers in a row, you'd enjoy significant understanding of this writer's principal works before you

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entered college. For obvious reasons this sort of summer research project stands the greatest chance of approval by your school, especially if you first get guidance on it from one of the school's best literature instructors.

- It's said that young people today have no heroes—they esteem media “celebrities” rather than people of real accomplishment. Is this true? Why not try to find out? Poll your classmates to find out which public figures they most admire. Ask among adults you know, especially the elderly: Who were their heroes when they were in their teens? Try to account for social changes, and what these imply. Write up the results.

- Conduct an “oral history” series of interviews with people who lived through the Great Depression and World War II, the two greatest disasters of the 20th century. Start, if you can, with elderly members of your own family—as a kind of oral family history. Get their stories on audiotape. What challenges did they experience? Where did they get the strength to hope and survive? How important were family ties and religious faith to them? How, in their views, have things changed in our society? Write up the results. (Have a sense of history about this, too. If you save the tapes of your grandparents' stories, these can be a precious family treasure. In the middle of the 21st century, your grandchildren can hear their great-great-grandparents recount what they experienced a century before.)

- Start working on a family genealogy. Trace your ancestry as far back as you can. This could become a lifelong hobby, something valuable to your present family and later to your own children.

- Secure present application forms for the colleges you are aiming for later and note the type of essays they require from applicants. Since these essay topics seldom change from year to year, you can start thinking them through, getting good advice, and writing them now. Why wait until fall of senior year to start working? By the time your competitors have learned the topics, you could have gone through several drafts—and turn in the best work you've ever done.

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All these points are just ideas and suggestions, all based on the successful experience of people your age. They can remain as just ideas, or you can convert them into goals and self-directed action. Remember, nobody can live your life for you. What happens to you is up to you. One way or another, you must someday account for how you use your time.