



# Five Essential Skills Ninth Graders Need in the Transition to High School



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## Introduction

For many students, the transition from middle to high school can be quite jarring. Students will typically encounter increased academic pressure with more homework, higher-stakes assessments, and more complex educational content across their ninth grade curriculum. These factors are coupled with the knowledge that a student's performance in ninth grade will affect their transcripts, ultimately becoming a significant part of their college applications. Adolescent brain research also tells us that there are varying degrees of high school 'readiness' among this age group. Many ninth graders are not yet emotionally mature enough to handle the increased pressure, not to mention the social challenges they encounter in their early teen years. Yet, ninth grade demands a significant shift in personal responsibility and expectations for self-management.

So, what are ninth graders (and their parents) to do?

Ninth graders (and ideally, their schools and support networks) need to focus on important organizational skills to help them manage their daily academic lives. These skills contribute to a student's *executive functioning*<sup>1</sup> ability, and will provide a firm foundation for the rest of their academic (and likely, professional) careers.

## Five skills to focus on to help smooth a student's transition to high school:

### 1. Daily use of a school/homework planner

As with any organizational skill, it is important that the student develop a school planner or system that is effective for the individual student's needs and learning style. Many schools provide planners for their students, but that system may not always provide the best organizational strategy for each student. Some will prefer a digital system in their phone, computer, or tablet, such as an app or to-do list. Some prefer a calendar layout so that they can see the month at a glance, while others will find that layout completely overwhelming, preferring instead to look at each week or just each day.

Complicating this process is the knowledge that your ninth grader's teachers will assign homework, papers, and tests using varying methodology. Some will put assignments on the chalk or white board every day. Some will put assignments in Google Classroom or via email. Some might even provide

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1. The term 'executive functioning' has endured countless meanings since 1966 when it was first coined. It has gained increased attention in the last fifteen years and currently includes the following skills: working memory, attention, self-monitoring, organization, flexibility, impulse control, task initiation, emotion regulation, planning, self-control, response inhibition, sequencing of behavior.

students with a term syllabus. Encourage your ninth grader to accumulate her assignments from each class/subject into his or her planner using one method, so she can easily see when assignments are due and when tests will occur. This will also help students to break down large assignments into smaller, more manageable tasks.

If finding a planner or a planning strategy proves to be difficult for your student and she needs more assistance, reach out to your school's academic center or academic skills teacher.

## **2. Create an effective and consistent homework environment**

Whether your ninth grader is in a day, boarding, independent or public school, it will be imperative that they have a workspace conducive to focus and productivity. It will be more fun to work together with your ninth grader to create such a space using these questions and tips:

- What types of assignments will your student be completing? Does she need a space to read books, write on worksheets and in a notebook? Will she need access to a computer, and a power source?
- Consider the noise and family traffic of the space. Will siblings or roommates be interrupting? Can she hear the television? Is she the type of student who thrives with background noise, or does she need complete silence?
- If she will be using a computer or tablet that is connected to the internet, can you develop rules around social media to make sure she isn't distracted while completing her homework? (There are some apps to help this as well. One example is [Freedom](#) for the Mac operating system.)
- Will it help your ninth grader if the space is inviting and comfortable? Or is an uncluttered and sparse space more conducive to her productivity?
- What supplies will she need? Dictionary, ruler, calculator, paper, pencils, tablet (and the related charger)? It can be a huge waste of time if your student is always searching for the tools she needs to complete her assignments. It may make sense to duplicate her school supplies at home, so she doesn't have to transport things from her locker to her backpack to home or dorm.

## **3. Email organization and management strategy**

Students in the 21st century encounter many communication methods in high school, but there is an increasing academic dependence on email. This may sound elementary, but determine what system your ninth grader's school uses for email. What are the expectations around email? Are students expected to check email twice, three times or more each day? Will teachers be sending assignments or extra credit via email? Support your ninth grader in learning how to organize their email with folders, labels, or categories so that they can accurately file emails they need to keep for an assignment, questions/answers from their teachers that might help in exam preparation, or project timelines. Try to help your ninth grader develop a system for replying to email promptly, and with proper email etiquette. It is also a good idea to help your ninth grader determine a system for keeping their email inbox relatively clear. We suggest keeping one's inbox under 50 emails.

Many schools have a department or faculty member devoted to academic skills. Encourage your ninth grader to reach out to this teacher for help or guidance on organizational skills.

## 4. Class materials organization

With increased academic dependence on technology, students are receiving information and classroom materials across many different platforms: they will take notes in class; their teacher will share something via Google Classroom, or email; they will be asked to watch a clip on YouTube; they will need to take notes from their textbooks (electronic or traditional paper); they will read novels on tablets; they will be expected to write comments on a class blog. The list is endless. How do they gather and organize all of these materials in one place so that they can effectively prepare for assessment?

Most importantly, the student needs to determine an organizational method that works for the student. We all learn in our own unique way. Encourage your 9th grader to try several organizational methods, electronic or physical, until they find one that works for them. The student is likely to be more invested in the strategy if she helps to create it herself. As with anything, any skill will need practice.

Here are a few organizational ideas:

- An accordion file with a tab for each subject or class.
- A three-ring binder with dividers for each subject. Dividers with pockets work well as students will likely receive handouts that aren't hole-punched.
- Color-coding materials by subject. Some students would rather have individual folders and notebooks for each subject. For example, color-code a green spiral notebook with a green folder for Biology class. Accordingly, the student could also color-code their physical or electronic to-do list or academic planner with corresponding colors for each subject. This will help a student know when to prioritize subjects while completing homework.
- For the student who prefers electronic organization, there are many apps that can significantly aid organization. A few apps for your consideration:
  1. [Complete Class Organizer](#) (\$4.99)
  2. [inClass](#)
  3. [Studious](#)
  4. Many schools use [Google Classroom](#) and [Google Drive](#). Students will need to tailor the organization of these platforms in a way that will work for them.

## 5. The tools to assess and debrief individual academic organizational systems

Remember that the skills discussed above demand practice, practice, practice. Encourage your student to verbally assess their organization at the end of each term or unit. It can be extremely helpful to 'talk it out' or debrief each unit or term to help your ninth grader determine whether or not their

organizational strategies are working or if some changes might improve organization, and thus academic performance.

**Here are some possible guiding questions for this debriefing conversation:**

Were you able to complete all of your homework on time?

Did you feel prepared for your classes?

Did your homework space help you concentrate and efficiently finish your assignments?

Are your teachers helping you to create effective organizational strategies?

## **In Conclusion**

Encouraging your ninth grader to focus on these five skills will help smooth her transition from middle to high school. By mastering organizational tactics that work for her, she will approach school with more confidence and personal accountability. As with all learning, it is essential to approach the acquisition of these skills with openness and constructive feedback. Your ninth grader will be more invested in her organizational strategies if she is an integral part of the creative problem-solving process. Remember to partner with your ninth grader's school. Reach out to the academic skills department or teacher. Encourage your ninth grader to develop a relationship with this teacher. Good luck!



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