



The Power of Setting Meaningful Goals¹

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Goal setting is one of the most powerful tools you have for improving your learning and performance. But there's a difference between hoping to "do better" and setting goals that truly work. Research consistently shows that students who set specific, challenging goals outperform those who just try their best. The key is learning how to set goals that are clear enough to guide your actions and meaningful enough to keep you motivated.

When goal setting works well, it helps you:

- Direct your attention and energy toward what matters most
- Build confidence through visible progress
- Develop skills for managing complex projects and deadlines
- Connect what you're learning to your future career and life

The essential point about setting goals is that you own them. They are most effective when you get specific about what you want, connect it to why it matters, and take action.

Four Goal-Setting Skills You Can Develop

Effective goal setting involves four interconnected skills: creating meaningful goals, building confidence, monitoring progress, and adjusting your approach. Developing these skills prepares you for success not only in your courses but also throughout your career.

¹ Content developed with AI, based on [the CAST UDL Guidelines™](#), scholarly sources, and web resources. Icons courtesy of [Flaticon.com](#) contributors.

1. Creating Meaningful Goals

Transform vague wishes into clear goals. A goal like "I want to improve my writing" becomes more powerful when it turns into "I will focus on improving my writing by completing assignments at least two days early, so I have time to review my draft, get feedback from a tutor or instructor, and make revisions before submitting."

Strategies:

- Make your goal specific enough that you'll know exactly when you've achieved it
- Connect it to something that matters to you personally—your career, your values, or your curiosity
- Set goals that stretch you but don't overwhelm—challenging enough to require effort, achievable enough to build confidence

2. Building Your Confidence

Your belief in your ability to reach a goal directly influences your success. Confidence builds through small victories, seeing others succeed, and recognizing that effort—not innate ability—fuels achievement.

Strategies:

- Break big goals into smaller milestones so you can experience progress along the way
- Look for examples of how others with similar backgrounds have achieved similar goals
- Remind yourself that struggle is part of learning—difficulty means you're growing

3. Monitoring Your Progress

Goals are most effective when you regularly monitor your progress. This isn't about judging yourself—it's about collecting information to help you succeed.

Strategies:

- Schedule weekly check-ins with yourself: "What's working? What isn't?"
- Keep a simple record of your progress—even brief notes help you see patterns
- Seek feedback from instructors and peers to get an outside perspective

4. Adjusting Your Approach

Changing your goal or strategy based on what you learn isn't failure—it's smart self-management. The ability to adapt is one of the most valuable skills you can develop.

Strategies:

- When you hit obstacles, treat them as information: What does this teach you?
- If a goal proves too easy, raise the challenge; if it's overwhelming, break it into smaller steps
- Apply what you learn from setbacks to your next attempt—this is how expertise develops

Key Takeaway

Goal setting emphasizes effort and strategy—not innate "talent"—as the path to achievement. When you set a clear goal and work toward it, you're developing skills that will benefit you throughout your life. The most effective goals are specific (telling you exactly what to do), personally meaningful (connected to what you care about), and challenging (requiring real effort). Your active involvement is what makes the difference.

Resources

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