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How to self teach organic chemistry

Are you ready to learn a year's worth of organic chem in seven short, glorious weeks? Organic Chemistry is a substantial, yet manageable, undertaking. And you won't be alone. About 200 students will join you in this quest to study carbon and fulfill medical school requirements. Heed the advice of a teaching assistant and four former students, and you, too, can survive organic chem. Maria Sperduto, a Dartmouth College junior, suggests that a little work ahead of time will make your life easier. "Prepare yourself for the rigor and intensity of the class, and if the teaching staff recommend a book, go through the entire book and do all of the exercises. This will help you get used to looking at something that scares you and looks entirely foreign. You will be in that situation many times throughout the summer." Maria Sperduto, a Dartmouth College junior, suggests that a little work ahead of time will make your life easier. "Prepare yourself for the rigor and intensity of the class, and if the teaching staff recommend a book, go through the entire book and do all of the exercises. This will help you get used to looking at something that scares you and looks entirely foreign. You will be in that situation many times throughout the summer." Tip: Preetha Iyengar, a junior at Washington University in St. Louis, read Organic Chemistry as a Second Language 1. "I did not have a strong background in chemistry, so reviewing basics and getting a little exposure to new material gave me confidence coming into the course." 2. Make organic chem your priority. Twelve-year veteran teaching assistant Peter Hamel offers a fair warning: "Expect it to be a full-time job and then some." Tip: Sperduto approached organic chem with the same mindset as she would training for a sport. "You are training for success in this class! You need to warm up (draw mechanisms, put diagrams in your room, make notecards), work hard while you're at practice (always pay very close attention in lecture), and cross-train (do all of the problems and work with your teaching assistant)." 3. Ask a lot of questions. The key is to stay focused. Nick Sikaczowski, who completed organic chem at Harvard Summer School while enrolled in a premed program at Northwestern, says, "Every student is going to be rattled by a difficult exam at some point (even if they don't show it). Stay focused on your goals and how doing well in organic chemistry will help you reach them." "We love the course, we love the students, we love the material, and we are here to help," says Hamel. "The TAs teach sections every day, and we make sure that time is useful to students. In addition, we staff a help room where students can get their questions answered." Tip: One way to organize "the fire hydrant of information" you'll cover, as Sikaczowski put it, is to color-code your work. Sperduto suggests colored pens. "Expect to see many of them! The successful people have various methods of categorizing information as they come across it during lecture. I used different colored markers to signify notecard material, important helpful information, and things that were unclear." Hamel points out, "What we can't do is just open up the students' heads and pour in the knowledge. Try to work out a problem on your own. When you hit a roadblock, look for several ways around it. If you just seek out the 'right' answer every time without first examining the problem from various perspectives, then you really only learn to recognize correct answers, but you will fail when asked to generate correct answers of your own accord." 4. Form study groups. In line with her training mindset, Sperduto says, "If possible, work in teams. Fostering working friendships with your peers will be helpful if you need a motivational boost to keep cranking out problems or do another practice exam. I made friends that I will have for the rest of my life. Be inspired by the brilliant minds around you!" 5. Learn from your mistakes. Recalls Sperduto, "I ruined a lab by breaking a glass pipette in our solution. But I worked with my lab partner and our TA in an attempt to continue. When we could not anymore, we looked to our peers' labs to learn what should have happened. I was absolutely horrified, but it was not a failure of a lab! If you do your best, despite your errors, you will learn what you are supposed to learn." 6. Don't simply memorize; seek to understand. "There is a lot of memorization, but one of your jobs as a student is to draw correlations and organize the information," adds Sikaczowski. Tip: "Stay focused on why reactions are happening (hint: pH, electrostatic forces, and sterics), as well as the function of the reagents (nucleophiles, electrophiles, oxidizing agents, reducing agents, acids, and bases)," suggests Sikaczowski. Iyengar recalls the moment when everything clicked. "I was trying to memorize 11 basic reactions for the first exam, but I kept getting them mixed up. Then I had my eureka moment that all 11 reactions were just different versions of the same process of electrons movement. I couldn't believe how easy it was after that! Understanding the molecular orbital theory made chemistry interesting and fun! It was like a little puzzle every time different things tried to react. Instead of memorizing, I was actually understanding the material and applying it." 7. Give yourself the credit you deserve. While you're in the thick of it, the seven weeks may seem neverending, but there's hope for you yet. "You will probably work harder than you might anticipate, but at some point, you'll feel proud by how much you can absorb in so short a time period," says Sam Miller. "At some point, I was in a pharmacy, and I started to recognize different prescriptions and could picture their chemical structures. Now I'm in the midst of studying for the MCAT, and I feel as though I at least recognize, if not feel comfortable, with all the organic chemistry material." Share your tips and advice in the comments below! Additional organic chem resource I'm sure everyone has had those moments when they aren't getting what they need from their teachers or syllabi. There comes a time in everyone's life where self-learning is important. Typically, I've found that it's more useful to self-learn because you're already interested in the concepts. That's a perfect situation in which having one of the best chemistry books for self-study comes in handy! You already want to learn, and you can dive deeper into certain aspects of the subject matter. Also, if either you or your kids are being home-schooled you may feel like you or them aren't getting the same information as others. Many textbooks seem to be dry and to only include what is necessary to get to the next grade level. Many decide to find out how to self-learn chemistry and find it to be an amazing journey. Here are some tips from Stanford University that might be useful. In any case, even if your studying in high school or college, learning to learn by yourself is always a great skill to have. I would say that one of the most interesting skills I possess, and that made me succeed in my chemistry career is that I learn pretty fast by myself. And there is no other way around nurturing that skill than just picking up a book, and manage to learn about something without having to attend a course. Our Top Choice Though there are many great textbooks out there to help self-learn chemistry, I've found that the "Focus on High School Chemistry Student Textbook" is the best one. Though it's a bit expensive, it provides a solid foundation to prepare you for college classes, and it's my top pick. Focus On High School Chemistry Student Textbook Table of Quick Comparison As always, here's a table of quick comparison between what we consider to be the best books to self-learn chemistry. Review of the Best Chemistry Books for Self-Study Whether you're new or you've been studying chemistry for a while, there are always going to be ways to improve. These are the best chemistry books for self-study that I've come up with. I hope you enjoy checking them out and reading them as much as I did! 1. Focus on High School Chemistry Student Textbook - Best Overall Those who want to learn chemistry on their own should consider this book. I've dubbed it the overall best for various reasons. For example, it includes 10 chapters, and they're all full-color. You're not going to see those dry, boring words blur from the page here. Focus On High School Chemistry Student Textbook On top of that, you're not just learning about one particular aspect of chemistry. The topics included here are: What are chemical reactions? Atoms and mass (moles, etc.) / Concept of acidity / Chemical bonding / Mixtures / Acid-base reactions / Intro to organic chemistry / Intro to experimental chemistry / RNA and DNA (biochemistry intro) / Polymers That's not even all of the topics that are covered, but you get the idea! The author's name is Dr. Rebecca W. Keller, PhD in biophysical chemistry. She really knows how to make chemistry easier to understand, making this a top choice for people who want to self-study AP chemistry. 2. Chemistry: Concepts and Problems - A Self-Teaching Guide If your ultimate goal is to master the fundamentals of the chemistry field, this guide could be helpful. Chemistry is considered a fundamental science because it touches everything else to do with science. Chemistry: Concepts and Problems, A Self-Teaching Guide This book is really cool, because besides general concepts, it includes links to other subjects, such as: Electronics / Physics / Biology / Astronomy / Environmental studies / Much more! I've found that many high school students don't feel like their textbooks give them enough information. Go pick up this book as a refresher course or to learn independently. Though you may not realize it, this can also be used to self-study AP chemistry! All in all, it offers step-by-step methods to boost your understanding of those fundamental chemistry concepts. Plus, the course is interactive and comes with study problems and practice questions. 3. Chemistry: The Central Science - Best In-Depth and General I realize that some people want to go more in-depth with their learning. If your goal is to learn as much as you can about the central science (chemistry), then this is the book for you. While it's comparable in price to some of the others, it's not on the higher end of the spectrum. Chemistry: The Central Science is a full-fledged intro to college level general chemistry textbook, so it starts at the beginning but you will find anything that you might want to know at this level. Chemistry: The Central Science On top of that, those who really like e-reading are sure to appreciate the eTextbook, which can be downloaded to your smart device. I love when textbook writers want to make it easier for everyone to learn their own way! For those who want a bit more, there's also a "Mastering Chemistry" course available with this one. You can sign up and pay for that class separately to get even more from the book. 4. High School Chemistry Unlocked If the goal is to find out how to self-study chemistry for high school, this book might be ideal. It tells you everything you should know about the subject and includes complex concepts that are easily understood. High School Chemistry Unlocked Plus, everyone gets self-assessments to pinpoint areas that require more review. You're going to be learning with hands-on practice and guided examples of how chemistry works in everyday life. On top of that, you can also go online to find bonus questions like those on the SAT and AP Chemistry exam. 5. A Self-Study Guide to the Principles of Organic Chemistry I know that many people enjoy organic chemistry, which is hard to come by in regular school curriculums. That's why this book is included. You can find out everything you want to know about organic chemistry. A Self-Study Guide to the Principles of Organic Chemistry It talks about: Intro to organic reaction mechanisms / Hydrocarbons, nomenclature, etc. / Bonding in organic compounds / Stereochemistry / Spectroscopic techniques applied to organic chemistry / Tons more There are over 100 charts and diagrams included so that you can visualize the bonds, structures and reaction mechanism while reading! This is a great intro textbook for the subject, but if you are really interested in organic chemistry, you might want to take a look at our in-depth reviews of the best organic chemistry textbooks. 6. Chemistry for Dummies - Best in the "for dummies" series Don't feel like Chemistry for Dummies is a slap in the face. I love this series of books because it breaks things down for you. However, it never talks down to you. Chemistry For Dummies On top of that, you're getting an inside look as to how chemistry actually works in everyday life, whether it's petroleum or medicine. When you're learning from your home-school or high-school textbook, you can also use this to get an idea of why this subject is so important. You're going to get modern and relevant examples of what you use chemistry for each day. Do you ever use the microwave or cook? You're utilizing chemistry. This book shows you that in an easy-to-understand format. Final Thoughts Learning how to self-study chemistry isn't hard, but you need the right tools. Any of these books can help on your journey. However, I feel that "Focus on High School Chemistry" is the best choice because it talks about so many different topics. You're not going to feel like you're just reading jargon all the time. It really focuses on adding color and excitement to the field of chemistry. Ultimately, I've found that it works great on its own or as a supplement to your high-school or home-schooling curriculum. Pick it up, and give it a try today!

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