

**A MINI-GUIDE TO SURVIVING (AND THRIVING IN)
HIGH SCHOOL**

BY OMER SALMAN

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge Ms. Ng for giving me this opportunity for writing this mini-guide, and without her support and guidance, I wouldn't have achieved many of my academic accomplishments during my years at RHS. I would like to thank my parents and family for always being supportive of me during my high school years and giving effective and timely advice. I would like to thank all my other teachers, principals, counsellors and friends who have always encouraged and motivated me to be a better student and person. Finally, I would like to thank RHS for all the great memories, and a place I looked forward to going every weekday morning.

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INTRODUCTION: WHO AM I?

My name is Omer Salman, and I was a student in RHS from grades 8 to 12. I was enrolled in the advanced math 9/10 and 10/11 programs, before deciding to do partial IB, with my two courses being Business HL and Math SL. I was mainly involved in the RHS green team (it's the best club in RHS!) and was part of the RHS tennis, table tennis, and cross country teams. I was also the captain of the BETA-U youth leadership team at the City centre community centre (if you're going into business, it's a great club to join). I could continue, but I think you're getting bored at this point. So who am I?

I would describe myself as an ambivert: someone who is generally an extrovert in certain situations and an introvert in other situations. If you get to know me well, I'm not the 'businessman, solemn-faced presenter' you see in front of the class. I can be loud, talkative, cheerful, and hopefully not too disruptive during classes. The reason I created this little guide was to give all high school students some insight into the seemingly large decisions we're forced to make during our time in high school, and how little changes we make in our daily lives can go a long way in achieving success in our goals and ambitions.

Oh, and here's a picture of me below. I need one for this mini-guide to be considered 'official' (If you find me on my social media, you'll see I use this everywhere; you got to dress for success, right?)



ACADEMIC SUCCESS: TIPS TO BECOMING A STRAIGHT-A STUDENT

Why do we go to school? The main reason is to eventually begin our careers and get a job, and that starts with academic success during school. Many students may feel discouraged when they like a course or subject, but don't do well in it, and then become further demotivated and stop caring about their grades. Here are a few tips that have helped me achieve academic success during my time at RHS.

1. Be present for class

"You miss 100% of the shots you don't take". Similarly, if you don't show up for the class in the first place, don't expect yourself to learn as efficiently. Being present for class shows the teacher that you're willing and committed to learning, and makes a good impression on your classmates as well. Also, try to be on time, and don't walk in halfway through the class because you had to get coffee during the lunch break.

Question: What if I don't like my (elective) course? It's not important anyway, I'll skip it.

Answer: Change it! Don't be afraid to email or approach your counsellors about changing your electives. No matter how good of a student you are, you'll never learn as much if you despise the course you're taking. My advice is to assess the course in the first 1-2 weeks, and if you don't like it, book an appointment with your counsellor before September ends and leave the class, and join a class you'll enjoy!

2. Communication, communication, communication!

a. Communication with parents/guardians

While I understand that everyone's home situation is different, keep your parents, guardians, or a trusted adult updated on what's happening at school. Tell them how you're doing at school, if there are any problems, or if you need some kind of academic help. Having a support system at home will help alleviate any stress from school and make your time in high school more enjoyable.

b. Communication with teachers

Teachers are not only at school to teach you the subject or class you're in, but they're also there to make you a better student and person in and outside of the classroom. Here are a few tips regarding specific scenarios that I always see occurring with teachers.

I'm going to be away from class, but there's no point in telling the teacher, they won't care.

Teachers do care! They care so much that if you keep on missing the class without excuses, they'll even call your parents or guardians to ask what's going on. Whatever reason you have to miss a class, always inform your teachers at least a week beforehand and bring a note from your parents or guardians as a form of verification. Your teachers will be extremely grateful, and it is a sign of your maturity and character as a student.

I don't get this topic, but I'm not going to ask the teacher for help. They can't help me.

It's in their name. TEACHER. If you don't understand the material, always ask for help. Sometimes a one-on-one explanation is easier for some students to understand compared to the whole class, and you and your grades will be a lot better once you do ask.

I'm having trouble outside of school, but my teachers won't care. There's no point in telling them.

Sometimes, we all go through tough times in our lives, and it can affect us physically, mentally and emotionally, and it might even affect your marks. Try to inform your teachers, counsellor, or (vice) principal about your troubles. You don't have to give a detailed reason, but enough so that they can try to help and alleviate any stress or worries you might be getting from school.

c. Communication with students

No, I'm not talking about you sitting with your friends talking about your plans for lunch or what you're going to do after school. This is about working productively and efficiently with your peers during class. This topic is extremely vast, and I'll give one specific point that I've learned throughout my years at RHS. Whenever there is a group project, the first thing you should do is take everyone's contact information and create some kind of group chat, whether on messenger, discord, slack, so you all can communicate and set up timings to work on and finish your project. And when I said you, I meant YOU. Take the leadership role in your group and always remind your group about deadlines and tasks given to them. This will give you confidence in your communication skills, give your peers confidence in your ability to lead, and it lets your teacher know that you're an active and determined leader in the classroom.

3. Use a daily/weekly plan

Remember that book you got at the start of the year? Called an agenda? Use it! If you don't like how it's formatted, make your task list or use online tools such as Google Calendars to keep you organized throughout high school.

One tool which immensely helped me is "Eisenhower's Urgent/Important Principle" chart. This chart will help you organize your tasks and projects according to what's most necessary instead of a humongous, messy list. Here is an example of this chart below.

		URGENCY	
		High	Low
IMPORTANCE	High	1 Urgent and important Do it now	2 Important not urgent Decide when to do it
	Low	4 Urgent not important Delegate it	3 Not important not urgent Dump it

I'd recommend using this chart weekly. Place the relevant tasks of that week into the appropriate section according to the importance of that task. I usually make this chart on a notepad, and it helps me to prioritize what I need to do and when I need to get it done. There are many different variations of this chart, and you can change it to fit your own needs.

4. Coursera course: Learning How to Learn

My grade 11 IB Business student-teacher recommended our class to do this course called 'Learning how to Learn'. He said it was a short, but concise course that would give you a lot of tips on studying methods and beating procrastination. Last summer, I thought it would be a good idea to try it out. It was one of the best decisions I made. It took me about a week to finish, and when I started applying the studying methods such as the Pomodoro technique to my school subjects, I saw the results in my grades. This course will open your eyes to how the brain works, how to study effectively and how to defeat procrastination and get the most out of your time. I recommend everyone to do this, and if you start implementing the material in your life, you'll see the positive results. Also, it's free! Here's the link below:

Learning how to Learn course: <https://www.coursera.org/learn/learning-how-to-learn?>

THE IMPORTANCE OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

One thing I regret not doing early enough is volunteering and engaging in extracurricular activities. I started volunteering after the summer of grade 9, and although I was able to build up a decent portfolio by the end of grade 12, I know I could have done better if I started earlier. Here are a few tips about extracurricular activities:

1. Start with 1 or 2 clubs/activities

When you first start volunteering, don't feel that you have to do everything and join all the different clubs and causes. Join 1 or 2 clubs or activities that interest you, and become involved as much as you can over time. In the later years, try diversifying your activities (to make your portfolio look better and finding new interests)

2. Find a club on Clubs Day, and maybe start your own!

The best way to become involved is to join a club on club day. There are dozens of clubs to join, and I'm sure you will find one that interests and motivates you. However, if you can't find a club that interests you or you want to do something yourself, start your club. The process is simple: have an idea, make a draft proposal, find a sponsor teacher (could be one of your current or previous teachers at RHS), and then inform the vice-principal or principal to start the club.

3. Other opportunities

There is a wide range of activities you can participate in within and outside of school. Besides joining clubs, there's also the athletic teams, the Colt Zone (1 and 2), and PE leadership. I've made a list of opportunities in the local community that you can join as well. Another resource to use is "icanhelp.richmond.ca". This website lets you explore various opportunities in community centres across Richmond.

Opportunities in the community:

- City Centre Community Centre Youth Leadership & Mentorship teams
- Richmond Green Ambassador Program
- RCFHA (Richmond Cosom Floor Hockey Association)
- Richmond Oval
- The local library and/or community centres (icanhelp.richmond.ca OR centre website)
- YELL (Youth Entrepreneurship Leadership Program) [offered at RHS, check website]
- YIP (Young Investors Program)

IB: TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

If you're in grade 10 or even grade 9 you've likely started thinking (or made up your mind) on whether or not to join the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Depending on who you talk to and their perspective and experience with IB, you can get extremely contrasting answers. Some will say it's the best program in the world, others will say it was a living Hell (some would even say some both). I hope to give you a balanced view of IB through my experience with the program and what my peers and close friends observed.

My experience with IB

Going into IB was one of the toughest choices I had to make during high school. There were always two sides to the story: either it was immensely beneficial and you would become a better student or person through it, or it would suck the life out of you and you'd end up with low grades. These two perspectives were the same if I talked to people who went through the program, Reddit posts, blog posts, talking with my peers and classmates about it. I decided to go into full IB by the deadline, albeit my many doubts if I would be able to handle it. I forgot about my decision until the summer after grade 10 came when those feelings of worry, doubt and anxiety came back. While I was reflecting in the summer, two realizations came to me regarding my decision:

- 1) I was indirectly peer pressured into my decision
- 2) I had certain personal obligations that I would have to give up if I joined IB, and I wasn't willing to give these up

I realized that because so many of my friends were going into IB, I was in this environment where I would feel left out for not joining them. I didn't want to be left out, so why not go with the flow with all of your friends? Those indirect comments such as 'Why wouldn't you do IB' or 'It'll be fun together, c'mon' do have a profound effect on your subconscious mind when making your final decision. My advice is to focus on your own goals and ambitions and don't let other people's opinions shape your decisions.

I also realized that there were more important things I had to focus on in my final 2 years. IB requires complete focus on the academic curriculum and requirements if you wish to get high grades, however, due to some personal obligations (which I won't mention) I realized that I would have to choose between the two: IB or my obligations. I decided that my obligations were more important than doing IB, and ultimately that is why I opted out during that summer. If you have personal obligations such as taking care of a sick loved one at home, or working outside of school due to financial instability in your family, or maybe you want to explore a new passion of yours, and you know that by taking IB you won't be able to complete your obligations then I would recommend you prioritize your obligations and compare them with the IB program, and see what's more important to you and if you can make some compromise or not.

One last point is that if you feel that you want to opt-out of IB, but it's already the summertime or September, it is possible. Contact your counsellor immediately and explain your situation, and I'm sure they will help you out. Also, if you're in grade 11 or 12 and IB is overwhelming you to the point that your mental and emotional health are severely impacted, it's completely fine if you drop out of the program. Your health and well-being are more important than academic achievement.

Success with IB?

If you plan on going into IB, there are three keys to achieving the highest grades and success in the program:

- Stress Management
- Time Management
- Constant Motivation

While all of these are also necessary to be successful even if you're not in IB, they are more so in the diploma program, due to the rigorous and intensive nature of the program. I recommend once again to complete the "Learning How to Learn" course to help you with your stress and time management (also for those who are not in IB!), and begin making daily/weekly schedules if you haven't done so. Make sure you have an end goal with doing the IB program. Do you want to get into a prestigious university or program, or do you want to build your skills for the career or industry you're going into? Doing IB because your parents or friends said so will likely lead to a lack of motivation to complete it, which will lead to more stress, procrastination, and ultimately lower grades.

I would say IB's main advantage is that it will make your transition to post-secondary immensely easier due to your university-like experience by completing the diploma program (and 'perks' such as getting university credits will help out too).

Success without IB?

The main advantage of not doing IB is the amount of extra time available. IB students are going to be busy throughout their two years in completing all the IB requirements and preparing for final exams. Provincial students, on the other hand, will have a great deal of time to become involved in extracurricular activities (due to the lighter workload compared to full IB). So my message to all of you not doing IB: take advantage of your free time. Volunteering, working, personal passion projects, athletics; keep yourself busy with productive activities outside of the classroom. Nowadays, post-secondary institutions consider your portfolio to be of great value (especially for those pursuing business), so the more meaningful and beneficial activities you do, the more well-rounded you will be and the greater your chances of getting into your dream school.

Partial IB?

If you want a 'taste' of the challenge of IB, but don't want the full meal, I'd recommend doing partial IB. Usually, partial IB students (including myself) would do 1-3 IB courses in courses of their interests that would help them strengthen their academic ability and knowledge, but also leave ample time to pursue extracurricular activities. One thing to note about the partial IB program is that your percentage will be used for calculating grades, and not your predicted or final IB grades.

DECIDING ON A FIELD/CAREER

As you get older and reach your senior years of high school, you'll be bombarded with the same old question by your parents, family friends, teachers and even friends: what do you want to do in the future? Some of you have already decided on your career path, some may have a vague idea and others may have no idea. I have a few tips for you on deciding your field or ideal career path below.

When to start thinking?

I'd recommend starting to think about your future career options during grade 10. By this point, you'd have a taste of the core subjects offered in high school and are now exploring different electives. Start by simply reflecting upon what subjects you enjoy and do well in, and what kind of career paths those subjects can lead to. If you're in grade 11 or grade 12, and you have no idea about what you're going to do, don't panic! A lot of students are in the same boat as you, and my next point should help you all in narrowing down a field or career path you'd like to pursue.

Passion, Market, and Ability

When deciding a career and field you want to go into, you have to consider the passion you have for it, the market for jobs in the field, and if you have the relevant skills and ability to succeed in your chosen field.

1) Passion

How much do you love the chosen field you want to go into? I'll use engineering as an example. Do you love building things? Do you like understanding complex mechanical systems? How much interest do you have in subjects such as math and physics? By answering a few simple questions like these, along with reflecting on your experiences in school and extracurricular activities, you should be able to get a good idea of what you're passionate about. When you want to specify the job you want in your career (ex: you're deciding to become a mechanical, civil or software engineer), then it's good to start doing research about that specific job online and asking professionals on their experience in that field.

2) Market

Another important aspect is there a market for your chosen field? Is there a growth in opportunities in the coming years? How tough is competition in the field? How about factors such as pay, location, and working on the job or remotely? Take all of these questions into consideration when deciding your field and career path. It's great if you have a passion for Monopoly, but there's likely no stable job market for professional Monopoly players.

3) Ability

Finally, do you have the relevant skills and ability to get your dream job or career? If you want to be an engineer, are your critical thinking and mathematical problem-solving skills

developed? Can you think creatively to solve tough problems? Do you know how to use tools such as AutoCAD adeptly? The more developed the relevant skills and assets for your chosen field, the more likely you are to succeed in post-secondary and beyond.

One final note is that it's up to you on which of the above 3 factors you want to weigh the most in your decision. Some people will consider passion to be the most important, others will say the job market, and some others will say their ability. It's all up to you and your personal goals and ambitions.

Can I change my field later?

Yes! I initially wanted to go into engineering in grade 11, but I changed my intended field to business in grade 12. You could have a change of mind during university, or even after completing your bachelor's degree! Don't feel pressured to do a certain subject, or degree because you have to go in this field. You'll likely be less motivated doing something you don't like and won't have as much success as you'd like in your career.

CHOOSING A POST-SECONDARY SCHOOL

If you're in grade 11 or 12, you're likely thinking of what to do after high school. Some of you might not do post-secondary at all, and that's completely fine as well. A lot of you are going to be attending a post-secondary school for your desired fields. Some of you may have made up your minds already and others have no clue. When I had started researching what school I wanted to attend in grade 11, one of the representatives of a post-secondary school gave me a great acronym to use when deciding a school called P.L.A.C.E. It stands for:

Passion

Location

Academics

Community

Experience

Using this acronym, I was able to make a calculated and well-thought-out decision for my choice of a post-secondary school. Here's a brief overview of what each letter in PLACE entails:

Passion

Can you explore your academic and extracurricular passions at this school, and how much of a variety is there? For example, I plan on studying business and I decided to go to Sauder business school at UBC. Sauder has about 10 different specializations for commerce, meaning I have a wide range of choices for the field I would want to pursue. Also, UBC has hundreds of clubs and extracurricular opportunities to help me find my passion in business. Look for a post-secondary school that can give you a varied range of choices to explore your passion in your chosen field, and has other programs and activities to build your skills and interests.

Location

Do you want to live abroad or at home? If living abroad, where do you want to go? If living at home, how close should the school be? How much do you value the school's physical campus, and do you care about the livability of the city you'll be residing in? Also, remember there the price tag will change depending on where you decide to live. I had decided to stay at home, and since UBC was the closest university to my home, it was an easy choice. Learn about the costs related to living at home or abroad for attending your chosen school, maybe visit the campus beforehand, and explore the city to get used to it.

Academics

What is the quality of education at your chosen school? Is the school known for academic excellence? Do class sizes matter to you? The main reason you're going to post-secondary is to become a professional in your chosen field, and if your chosen school has

inadequate facilities (libraries, studying areas etc.) or doesn't have a quality education offered, it's best to not go there compared to other options open to you.

Community

Is the community welcoming and inclusive? Do you feel that you'll be able to easily integrate into the new environment? You're likely going to be staying at your chosen post-secondary school for around 4 years, and you'll have a much better experience if you're able to make friends easily and have a supportive community to help you excel during your time at the school.

Experience

Is your chosen school known for having great overall experience? Do you think you'll be able to grow as a student and a person during your time there? This last point takes into account the previous 4 points. Post-secondary is another chapter in your life, and an enriching experience will help you grow as an individual and give you confidence when you leave post-secondary to the next phase of your life.

WRITING PERSONAL PROFILES AND SCHOLARSHIP ESSAYS

For all those in grade 12 or even in grade 11, you'll likely be writing at least several essays for personal profiles and entrance scholarships when applying for your post-secondary schools. If you plan on going into UBC specifically, the personal profile is an integral part of the application process and it is one of the deciding factors regarding your acceptance into UBC. Here are a few tips on writing eloquent, effective and polished personal profiles and scholarship essays.

1) Read all the instructions, questions and guidelines CAREFULLY

This may seem obvious, but I cannot tell you how many times I, my friends and classmates have misread assignments and projects in class and felt so disappointed and frustrated afterwards for unnecessarily losing marks. The last thing you want is to get rejected because you didn't read the instructions properly. Read them with a fresh mind, read them multiple times, and if you are confused about anything, ask! Ask your friends, mentors, teachers or even email the post-secondary school about your issue. When you fully understand all the instructions, you will be able to construct effective and impactful responses for the relevant questions.

2) Start as early as you can!

For the UBC personal profile, I had started brainstorming for it eight weeks before and had begun writing it six weeks before the early admission deadline. Starting early will allow you to brainstorm the ideas you want to discuss and write sophisticated answers with sufficient time for editing and proofreading before the deadline. While I started early for the UBC personal profile, I had only started 2 days before for the SFU entrance scholarship. Did I win it? Of course not. Results are dependent on how much time and effort you exert throughout the process.

3) Be vulnerable; this isn't a typical English essay

In English class, we're usually writing our essays in the third person and are explaining abstract ideas which generally have no relation to our personal lives. We like to use 'fluffy' language and a plethora of descriptive words that are 7-8 letters long. Post-secondary schools don't want your English essays. They want to know about you. Your essays will always be in the first person, and you need to be able to articulate your experiences in a direct, but eloquent manner. They want to see authenticity and vulnerability in your writing. A general rule of thumb is that 80% of your essay responses to each question should be about your actions and experiences, with a minimal focus on the introduction and conclusion. The more you're able to vividly and accurately describe your experiences, the more likely post-secondary schools will understand who you are and be willing to accept you into their institution.

4) Have a 'permanent' proofreader and mentor

When you finish your profile or scholarship essay, you might be exhausted and wanting to hand it in and get it over with. However, you might not realize the number of mistakes that are within your essay, and post-secondary schools are looking for students who can not only write well expressively but also technically. Even when we proofread our work, we tend to overlook many typos and mistakes, and a new set of eyes can notice these errors that we might never have identified. I am grateful to have had a mentor and proofreader during my six week period of writing the UBC personal profile (who also helped me with other applications and scholarships throughout the year), and I believe without the external support, I would not have been accepted into my top-choice school.

FINAL WORDS

Whether you're in grade 8 or graduating in a few months, I'd like to give you 3 final pieces of advice on high school: work smart, enjoy it all, and be resilient! Learn how to work productively and efficiently, which will help you manage your time and stress, and allow you to explore your other passions or spend time doing other activities. Try to enjoy every moment in class, outside of class, at lunch, wherever or whatever you're doing. These 5 years will fly by and if you're able to enjoy it all, you'll be able to appreciate your time spent at high school a lot more. Finally, be resilient. Sometimes, things will get tough, whether it's due to a big project, test, family issues or anything that you're going through. Remember that you have a community that is willing to assist, support and encourage you to overcome your difficulties and be stronger and better than before.

If any of you want to contact and ask me about anything in this mini-guide, or just want to talk, you can connect with me on LinkedIn and Facebook (search up "Omer Salman" and you'll see a guy with glasses and a beard; that's me). Thank you for taking the time to read this and I wish you the best of luck on your high school journey!