

How to Study More Effectively

Concentration is an important skill for using your time efficiently on academic and other thought-based tasks. When you are awake, you are always attending to something. Concentration is most often affected by three factors: priorities and attitudes, environment, and your physical condition.

ENVIRONMENTAL CAUSES

Creating a study environment that makes studying easier seems like a simple thing to do. However, many students fail to control things that compete with their abilities to concentrate. Every student is different in regard to what is distracting or comforting when they study. Here is a list of the most common environmental distractions and possible solutions:

Noisy or uncomfortable study area - reducing distractions begins with finding a quiet, comfortable place to study - this could be your bedroom or the library.

Incomplete study materials - develop and use a system that allows you to keep track of all materials needed for studying for each subject so that you are not stopping to find missing materials.

Visual distractions - re-orient yourself in your space to avoid the distractions (e.g. - turn your chair so your back is to the window), find a different space that is less likely to distract you.

Auditory distractions - monitor yourself to see what makes you a better studier - TV on? Radio on? Telephone ringing? Then, tailor your study space to minimize or eliminate the noises that distract you. Earphones or earplugs can also be useful in some situations.

Conveniencies - be ready to study by taking care of those things that will likely distract you, e.g. have a drink handy, go to the bathroom before you start to study, etc.

PHYSICAL CONDITION

Your ability to study or concentrate depends a great deal on what shape you are in at the moment you sit down to study. Here are some issues to consider when planning to study:

When do I study best? - some people are "morning people" and some are "night owls". If you are trying to study at a time when you already know you will be tired, you are making your life that much more difficult. Study at a time when you feel most alert.

How long to study? - most research shows that human beings are capable of focused concentration for about an hour, give or take a few minutes. Plan your studying so that you take short, scheduled breaks. This will help you refresh yourself and increase your ability to concentrate.

What to study - research also shows that, on average, people do better at concentrating by varying what they are concentrating upon. You may find that alternating the subjects you study among the hour-long study blocks you create helps you to stay more focused overall.

General energy level - the more run down you get, the more difficult it is to concentrate. Overall, the best way to prepare yourself for tasks that require concentration is to be sure you are getting plenty of sleep and moderate exercise.

Physical comfort - you may find that it is less distracting for you to wear certain kinds of clothes when you study. You may also need to factor in the temperature of the study area you have chosen so that you are dressed appropriately for that as well.

PRIORITIES AND ATTITUDES

Successful concentration demands that you allow yourself to focus on what you are doing. Here are some of the internal things that make it difficult to concentration:

Boredom and dislike - Many students mistakenly believe that their tuition entitles them to be entertained in class and by their study materials. **You must find some reasons which satisfy you for taking the course and passing it.** Otherwise, you'll spend more time thinking, "Why are they making me take this?" than you will studying and concentrating on the material you need to learn.

Large tasks - A good way to deal with a study task that seems overwhelming is to break it up into small sections. For long reading assignments, read each section, then stop and recall. For large projects, break them into small steps, prioritize the steps, and tackle one step at a time. **If possible, take short breaks between sections to give yourself a chance to relax and then re-focus.** Finally, try devising a system of "rewards and punishments" for having or not having accomplished what you intended to do.

Carrot versus Stick - motivation can be divided in to two types. Stick people wait until the anxiety about being able to complete the project provides them with the "motivation" (fear, actually) to do the task, lest they fail...and are willing to beat themselves afterwards for not doing it or not doing it as well as they should have. Some of you might recognize this as procrastination. Procrastination will eventually take its toll on your body and mind. Carrot people plan a course of action in advance, break large task into smaller ones, and plan rewards for accomplishing things on time and punishments for failing to complete things. **Carrot people live longer and are healthier.**

Anxiety - it is important to know the source of your anxiety so that you can deal with it. While the sources of anxiety vary from person to person, many times the anxiety arises from a concern about lack of appropriate skills to successfully complete a task. Paradoxically, often the fastest way to reduce anxiety about an upcoming task is to do it. Check your study skills and make sure you know the most efficient ways to learn the

subject. Seek help in learning new skills that will help you be more productive and successful. At the same time, check your self-talk to see what worries you have about your abilities. **Human beings tend to act the way they believe they will - so if you spend your time doubting your abilities, you are more likely to find yourself being less successful.** Look for ways to change your self-talk or find someone to help you change it.

Daydreams - Daydreaming is often a sign that you are pushing past the point where you can concentrate. When your mind starts to wander, stop and recall important points you have just read. Then, if you need to, turn away from the book and try to continue the daydream. When you're ready to read again, do so. The trick is not to daydream and read at the same time. If you find you cannot stop daydreaming, it may mean that there are other things that need to be attended to or that you are too tired to concentrate and may be better served by taking a short nap or going to bed.

From the Texas Woman's University Counseling Center