



Tips for Improving Concentration

Study in a space with minimal distractions

Find a place that fits your studying needs, and try to make it your regular study space. Once you're there, your mind knows that it's time for studying. If you choose to study where you normally sleep, eat, or socialize, you will be tempted to do those activities. An ideal study location should be free of distractions (friends, televisions, or cell phones). It should have good lighting and a comfortable (but not too comfortable) chair. Studying in bed, although tempting, often leads to naps and should be avoided.

Use your best times for studying

Do you often have lots of energy earlier in the day or later in the afternoon? Are you itching for a nap after lunch? Concentration is better during your most alert hours of the day, so use that time to study your most difficult subjects. When you're feeling less energetic, you can organize your notes, study easier courses, or complete other tasks like household chores or errands.

Plan your schedule

Once you've made a schedule that suits your needs, it is easier to settle into your routine. A schedule creates a sense of urgency and allows you to focus on the task at hand whether that task is attending classes, eating lunch, exercising, or studying.

Take breaks

Scheduling short study sessions and taking regular 5 to 10 minute breaks can help if you have trouble staying focused. A little rest renews your energy. You can build up your brain muscle endurance over time by increasing your study time incrementally. If you have trouble getting started, time your breaks using Wedging on page 2.

Subdivide your large assignments into small steps

Subdividing large assignments into smaller and more manageable steps can help you to stay focused on difficult projects that are overwhelming. Set very specific, short-range, and reasonable goals in order to get started. Then, focus on one element at a time in order to make progress towards completing your larger project. For more details on how to do this, please refer to our STAR goals handout.

Use active learning strategies

It is easier to stay focused on your studies when you use active learning strategies. Don't just read; read out loud, use a highlighter, and write notes in the margins of your book. Ask yourself questions while you read and during class, take notes in class to stay focused, and try to make connections between the subject matter and its real world applications.

Develop self-regulation strategies

Everybody has a wandering mind from time to time. Learning to focus may take time and require practice, but practice will produce results. Eventually you should be able to train your mind not to wander. The following strategies can help with this process.

Be Here Now:

When you notice that your mind is wandering, calmly remind yourself to “be here now!” When you are in class or studying and you find your focus wandering off, repeat the words “be here now!” (Schuette, 1989).

The Spider Technique:

When you hold a tuning fork up to a spider web, the spider will notice the vibrations and come looking for its food. After a while the spider will figure out that there is no food, and it will stop responding to the vibrations. In the same way, you can train yourself to ignore distractions like people talking, doors slamming, or telephones ringing. Let the world go on around you without diverting your attention. In other words, learn to ignore the insignificant vibrations (Schuette, 1989).

Worry List:

If worrying about things becomes an unavoidable distraction, write them down and then put them aside, so you won’t forget them; you can deal with them later. Having a designated notepad for such issues will allow you to let those troublesome thoughts go so that you can return to the present. If the worry is a “to-do” list item, then you’ll remember to do it later. If it is a more general worry about failing the test, writing it down will allow you to acknowledge the worry and put it aside while you are studying or listening to a lecture.

Wedging:

The wedging strategy is one way to get started so that inertia and momentum can naturally take over. To begin, sit down and focus on studying for a minimum of five minutes. After five minutes, you can decide to keep going, or you can take a break. If you decide to take a break that’s fine, but time your break with a kitchen timer, and make a commitment to study for another five minutes once your break is over. This way you can build up your focus gradually and still get some work done (Walsh, 2004).

Use rewards as an incentive

Create a system of rewards in order to stay motivated and focused. Rewards can be simple things like taking a walk, eating a snack, or checking your e-mail after you have finished reading and highlighting 10 pages of your textbook. Just make sure that you are rewarding yourself for tasks that have been completed and that the type of reward matches the task. If it is important to get a lot of work done, then reduce the amount of reward time. Have a big reward set for completing larger tasks or assignments (ex: going out with friends after completing an essay draft).

Take care of your body

In order for your brain to be mentally alert, it is important to stay healthy. Make sure that you eat well-balanced meals every day, and try to avoid overusing stimulants like sugar or caffeine to stay alert. Get some exercise on a regular basis, and try to get a good sleep every night. Eight hours is usually recommended. This will help you to stay alert during the day, and it will help you to build up your immune system.

References

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Walsh, P. (Writer). (2004). *Winning through wedging* [Video podcast]. Retrieved from http://maclife.mcmaster.ca/academicskills/media/mov/2004_wedging.mov