

Improving Concentration

This three-step process can improve your ability to concentrate:

Step 1: Learn the causes of poor concentration.

External Causes

Easiest to control

Noise—Move away from noisiest area; music that is more interesting to you will disturb you more than uninteresting or “Muzac” type of music.

Environment—Where you choose to study and work. It’s difficult to study with the TV or stereo in next room. Is chair too comfortable? Is refrigerator too close? Are there people in the next room?

Internal Causes

More difficult to control

Boredom

Dislike or anxiety about the subject you are studying.

Daydreaming while reading

Worries or personal problems

Awesomeness of study task

Complete the Study Distraction Analysis form. Decide which factors hinder your concentration.

Step 2: What you can do to control these factors.

NOISE—Noise is one of the most serious single obstacles to effectively study; learn to study in a quiet place.

- However, there’s almost always some noise. Don’t get annoyed. The annoyance distracts you more than the noise.

ENVIRONMENT—Determine the time of day/night or the place that works best for you. It may be that you study physics better in the library but psychology better at home. If you are a day person, reserve daytime studying for learning new material and use evening study time for review.

- Conditioning effect is created between you and your desk, don’t nap or daydream there. The desk acts as a cue for what you always do there (study effectively).
- Proper lighting and room temperature – eyestrain, tension, dull headaches and sleeping interfere with concentration. Eliminate glare, use a shade or indirect light. Light the whole room not just desk.
- Use a book stand to prop book up and hold pages down. This creates a feeling of readiness, physical freedom for notes, etc.
- The next time someone walks past control the urge to look up. At first you will still be distracted but soon you will phase it out.

BOREDOM—Find things that satisfy you about the course. Talk with other students or the instructor. Decide why you are taking the course.

- If a particular text is boring (due to style of the author’s writing) find an alternative book in the library with the same subject – now go back and read your text with more understanding and less boredom.
- Explore the possibility of dropping the course—if you doing well. It may be better to take it in the summer at a faster pace.

DISLIKE OR ANXIETY—Check your study skills and make sure you know how to study that particular subject. Speak to a counselor about ways to reduce anxiety.

DAYDREAMING—Learn to clearly separate your daydreams from your reading.

- Have a sheet of paper where you put a check every time you are not concentrating. After 2 weeks the check will be greatly reduced.
- When reading text, stop every few paragraphs and write a brief summary. If you are unable to do it, go back and re-read with determination.

WORRY AND PERSONAL PROBLEMS—Do something concrete to alleviate your worries and problems.

- Talk to a friend
- Gather information about how to solve a particular problem. Make a decision
- Speak to a counselor at Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) 713/ 743-5454. It's free.

AWESOMENESS OF STUDY—Break your study tasks up into small, manageable sections; study these sections and then hold yourself responsible for them by recalling important points or asking yourself sample test questions about what you have just read; go over the material with a friend; underline notes or text. Reward yourself for each small accomplishment.

Step 3: Make control of these factors habitual.

The only way to do this is to practice and make them a part of your routine. Set realistic yet specific goals—don't set yourself up for failure.

Three things to do before you start studying or reading:

1. Ask yourself, "Do I really intend to work in this book?" Is there something more constructive you could do?
2. If you do intend to work, decide how long you will work on the subject; think about effective study periods and plan this way.
3. Decide how much work you intend to accomplish within this time. If it is a difficult chapter it may take longer than usual; plan for this.

Some information adapted from How to Study in College 2nd ed. Walter Pack 1974
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