

Concentration

The art or practice of concentration, no matter if studying biology or playing pool, is to focus on the task at hand and eliminate distraction. We all have the ability to concentrate - sometimes. Think of the times when you were “lost” in something you enjoy: a sport, playing music, a good game, a movie. That’s total concentration!

However, at other times, your mind wanders from one thing to another, or your worries distract you. Perhaps outside distractions take you away before you know it. Or, maybe, the material is boring and difficult.

What you can control:

Place

- Get a dedicated space, chair, table and lighting environment.
- Put up a sign to avoid being disturbed or interrupted.

Routine

- Accommodate your day/night time energy levels.
- Avoid your cell phone or telephone.
- If you like music in the background, OK, but don’t let it be a distraction.

Focus

- As an exercise before you begin studying, think of those times when concentration is not a problem for you - no matter what situation. Now try to feel or imagine yourself in that situation. Repeat before each study session.
- Recapture that experience immediately before studying by placing yourself in that moment.
- Before you begin studying, take a few minutes to summarize a few objectives, gather what you will need, and think of a general strategy of accomplishment.

Incentives

- Create an incentive for successfully completing a task (such as calling a friend, a food treat, a walk, etc.)
- For special projects such as term papers, design projects, long book reviews, set up a special incentive.

Topics

- Change the subject you study every one to two hours for variety.
- Create specific learning goals.

Activities

- Alternate reading with more active learning exercises.
- Ask yourself how you could increase your activity level while studying. Perhaps a group would be best? Creating study questions?
- Ask your instructor for alternative strategies for learning. The more active your learning, the better.
- Take regular, scheduled breaks and drink lots of water.
- Do something different from what you’ve been doing (e.g., walk around if you’ve been sitting) and go to a different area.

Rewards

- Reward yourself when you've completed a task.
- Be careful about rewarding yourself too early!

Best Practices

Be Here Now

This deceptively simple strategy is probably the most effective. When you notice your thoughts wandering, say to yourself:

“Be here now”

and gently bring your attention back to where you want it.

For example, you're studying and your attention strays to all the other homework you have, to a date, to the fact that you're hungry. Say to yourself:

“Be here now”

Focus back on subject with questions, summarizing, outlining, mapping, etc. and maintain your attention there as long as possible. When it wanders again, repeat:

“Be here now”

and gently bring your attention back, and continue this practice, repeatedly. It will work!

Do not try to keep particular thoughts out of your mind. For example, as you sit there, close your eyes and think about anything you want to for the next three minutes - anything except cookies. Try not to think about cookies...when you try not to think about something, it keeps coming back. (“I'm not going to think about cookies. I'm not going to think about cookies.”)

You might do this hundreds of times a week. Gradually, you'll find that the period of time between your straying thoughts gets a little longer every few days. Be patient and keep at it. You'll see some improvement!

Do not constantly judge your progress. Be easy on yourself. Good practice is enough to say that you did it, and that you are on the road.

If you want more support for concentration issues, make an appointment an Education Counsellor in Student Affairs.

Worry or Think Time

Research has shown that people who use a worry time find themselves worrying 35 percent less of the time within four weeks. Here's how to do it:

1. Set aside a specific time each day to think about the things that keep entering your mind and interfering with your concentration.
2. When you become aware of a distracting thought, remind yourself that you have a special time to think about them.
3. Let the thought go, perhaps with the “Be here now” strategy.
4. Keep your appointment to worry or think about those distracting issues.

For example, set 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. as your worry/think time. When your mind is side-tracked into worrying during the day, remind yourself that you have a special time for worrying. Then, let the thought go, and return your focus to your immediate activity.

Tallying Your Mental Wanderings

Have a 3 x 5 inch card handy. Draw two lines dividing the card into three sections. Label them “morning,” “afternoon,” and “evening.”

Each time your mind wanders, make a tally in the appropriate section. Keep a card for each day. As your skills build, you'll see the number of tallies decrease.

Maximize Your Energy Level

When is your energy level at its highest? When are your low energy times? Study your most difficult courses at your high energy times. Are you at your sharpest early in the evening? Study your most difficult course then. Later in the evening? Work on your easier courses or the ones you enjoy the most.

Most students put off the tough studies until later in the evening, but that's when they become tired, and it is more difficult to concentrate. Reverse that experience by deciding which subject or project requires the most concentration and doing that first.