

Study Skills Tips

Student Counselling Service

Concentration Management Strategies

If you have difficulty getting started on a study session, or if you are not accomplishing what you have scheduled (given it is realistic) then these strategies may help to focus your attention and reduce distractions but first you need to look at your study environment, physical and mental. You need to have a private or quiet place to study that is comfortable, well lit and free of distractions. You also need a study routine consisting of time allocation and study habits. Once you have established these, concentration become easier to establish and maintain. However, even given ideal conditions it is sometime difficult to concentrate on study.

People have different attention spans and it often depends on the task. You must first identify when the difficulty occurs, which means monitoring to discover the source of distraction. If the lack in concentration is due to external distractions - like the television or radio interfering - then you need to establish control, either by negotiating study time with your family or roommates, or by finding a suitable alternative study area. If the problem seems to stem from an internal source then there are several strategies you can try to minimise internal distractions:

1. Become more active in the studying process by:
 - Asking questions
 - Thinking about the meaning of what you are studying
 - Thinking of applications for the information
 - Using other Deep Processing Approaches
 - Trying to teach someone else (or even something else, like the couch!)
 - Using different books on the same subject
 - Participating in a study group
 - Use a variety of learning styles – move around, use visualisation and mental rehearsal.
 - Use techniques such as trigger words or phrases to help you refocus your attention. Tell yourself “just listen to the tape”, “Keep going, you can have a break soon”. These may be words or phrases someone has said to you in the past that helped you keep going when you would have rather given up.

2. Control mind wandering and daydreaming by
 - Reducing the frequency of mind wandering by keeping track of it with a tick in the margin of notes or page whenever your mind wanders; the goal is to reduce the number of ticks per page.
 - Keeping a memo or notebook handy so that every time you think of errands or things you have to do, jot it down and return to reading, listening etc.
 - If your mind tends towards worry about falling behind or personal problems, write them down and make a decision to “worry” about

them later. Do not ignore them but reschedule a better time to deal with them. Return to task.

- Using thought stopping and private speech; see Motivational Strategies. The idea of these strategies is that two activities do not mix well - concentration and worry, so the purpose is to avoid the less useful occupier of your mental energy (worry, daydreaming) by addressing it and then immediately redirecting your attention to the study task at hand.

3. Take a short break when you are tired.

- Feeling tired could also mean you are bored with a particular subject. Try switching subjects to get a second wind.
- Study harder subjects, those that need all your concentration, first when you are freshest.
- If you take a break, decide before hand how long it will be and stick to it. If necessary, set an alarm clock.

4. Building up the amount of time you concentrate.

If you find it hard to concentrate on one particular subject or task, start by telling yourself you will really pay attention for the first 10 minutes. If that was successful, then the next study period try for 15 minutes of good concentration, and continue to up the time.

5. Eat, sleep and exercise properly

Being mentally and physically fit and maintaining good health are closely related to the ability to concentrate.

Last updated May 2003 by student-counselling@tcd.ie

(c) Copyright, Trinity College Dublin