Guide to Improving Concentration

STUDENT'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE STUDY #10

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Do you have trouble concentrating on your homework assignments? If your answer is yes, you are not alone. A recent survey found that 4 out of 5 college freshmen believe this is one of their major study problems. The ability to concentrate varies greatly from person to person. Some students appear to have little or no trouble concentrating and can study practically anywhere, oblivious to what goes on around them. Most students are highly distractible, however, and cannot concentrate on their studies unless their study environment is free of distraction. In fact, susceptibility to distraction has been found to be a major problem for most students.

Distractions can be either psychological or physical in nature. Psychological distracters stem from the pressures and tensions caused by the various emotional forces influencing our lives. Physical distractions result from the meaningful sights and sounds received by our visual and auditory senses. Frequently, however, the physical distracter will also serve to remind us about a psychological problem.

HANDLING PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRACTIONS

Common sources of psychological distraction include disagreements with parents, problems with the opposite sex, friction with one's roommate, or financial worries. Such internal distractions are detrimental to concentration because of the worrying and daydreaming accompanying your preoccupation with the problem. Consequently, the problem must be eliminated, solved, or brought under control before you can concentrate effectively on your studies.

What should you do about your psychological distractions? A personal problem can best be dealt with by systematically analyzing why the problem exists and how it can be resolved. Oftentimes, you can think through the probable causes and possible solutions for a problem on your own. Sometimes, however, the problem may be so serious or so sensitive that professional help is desirable. In either approach, the important elements are that you face the problem and attempt to deal with it realistically. Having done this, you will then be able to turn your attention to your studies with the peace of mind that comes from having done all that you can do about your problem. On the other hand, not facing the problem will surely produce anxiety and make effective concentration very difficult, if not impossible.
Most college campuses provide facilities for giving professional help on psychological problems. The college counseling center or student health service usually fulfill this function on larger campuses, while such assistance is formally available through the Dean of Students office at smaller colleges. If you find the interference to your concentration is both persistent and pervasive, you probably should consider seeking professional help in protecting yourself from psychological distracters.

HANDLING PHYSICAL DISTRACTIONS

Physical distractions are almost always present in our environment and they often reduce our effectiveness in performing intellectual tasks. For example, research has confirmed that reading comprehension and retention are lowered by listening to lively music. But, since it does not affect their reading speed, most students are unaware that they are being influenced by the distraction. That, of course, gets to the heart of the problem. We do not act to eliminate physical distractions from our study area because we do not realize how much they affect us.

Regardless of where you study, your study efficiency is influenced by three major variables: 1) auditory distractions, 2) visual distractions, and 3) disorganization. Fortunately, you can readily evaluate and correct poor study conditions stemming from all three sources. Avoiding distraction stemming from these sources requires careful planning, but pays off handsomely in terms of increased study efficiency.

Auditory Distractions

Auditory distractions stem from three major sources: 1) conversation, 2) radio and television, and 3) outside noise. Each type of distraction tends to reduce your study efficiency by impairing your ability to concentrate.

Conversation. If you are like most students, you enjoy talking with others about anything and everything. Indeed, "bull sessions" with other students can be both pleasant and valuable, but they should not be allowed to distract you from your studies. In fact, you should try to avoid all conversation during time set aside for studying. When studying in your room, you should keep your door closed so as to discourage unwanted visitors. If this doesn't work, you may need to hang a "Do Not Disturb" sign outside your door. If you have a roommate, you should either arrange to study at different times or agree to observe "quiet hours" for studying. If both these methods fail, you may have to find another place to study. Telephone calls should likewise be discouraged during study time, and unavoidable telephone conversations should be kept as brief as possible.

Radio and Television. Although many students defend the practice, most authorities criticize studying with a phonograph, radio, or television set turned on. There are, of
Your desk should provide ample space for spreading out your study materials. Most students find that an area less than 24 by 36 inches is too small. Don’t keep your desk cluttered with unnecessary material. Before you begin studying, clear your desk of everything for which you have no immediate need. Finally, place your desk facing an empty wall rather than facing a window, door or your roommate.

If you really want to do it, you can eliminate unwanted visual distractions quickly and easily through the following three-step process. First, sit down at your desk and face directly forward. Second, have someone draw two chalk lines, one extending left and one extending right, at 45 degree angles from your eyes to the wall behind your desk. Third, clear everything not directly related to studying from the area included within the resulting triangle. Of course, you must continue to keep this area cleared of unwanted visual distractions or you will soon be back where you started.

**Disorganization**

The third enemy of concentration is a lack of organization. One symptom of disorganization is frequently interrupting your studies to sharpen pencils, borrow paper, hunt for missing notes, etc. Eye-strain, sleepiness, and physical discomfort while studying may also indicate poor organization of one’s study environment. To reduce distractions caused by disorganization, you need to pay particular attention to two aspects of your study environment – your working area and your study materials.

**Working Area.** A suitable chair and adequate working space are essential to effective study. The experts advise that you sit in a straight-back, comfortable chair while studying. A chair that is too comfortable will produce sleepiness; one that is too uncomfortable will cause restlessness. Reduced concentration is the final result in either case. Also, you should avoid studying in bed or stretched out on a couch. Both positions are normally associated with relaxation, not with the mild tension required for concentration. Studying in your pajamas is a bad idea, too. This may sound ridiculous at first but if you stop to think about what you ordinarily do when you put on your pajamas, you’ll see why it’s not a good idea. Exactly...you fall asleep!

Lighting, both natural and artificial, should be evenly distributed over the desk surface, and should not glare on your book or reflect into your eyes. Indirect lighting is better than direct lighting. Most reading lamps, especially the concentrated intensity type, when trained directly on your reading area will produce glare and induce eye-strain, headache, and fatigue. To avoid this problem, use a fluorescent lamp whenever artificial lighting is required.

Room temperature and ventilation are also important. Some students keep their rooms too hot and stuffy; others, too chilly and drafty. Although room temperature is somewhat a matter of individual preference, studying in a room that is too hot or too
course, a few individuals who study with the radio or television on and still make excellent grades. Nevertheless, these media of entertainment are intended mainly for relaxation and enjoyment. Because they are enjoyable and relaxing, they are very likely to distract you from studying.

Television is clearly the most distracting of the three because two senses — vision and hearing — are stimulated simultaneously. How about a softly playing radio turned to a program of good music? Even if you aren't distracted by the latest popular hit, the singing commercials are certain to destroy your concentration. Of the three, only the phonograph allows you to control program content. A musical background for studying does appear to help some students. In fact, a low-level musical background may be helpful because it serves to drown out other auditory distractions. Your musical background will not remain such, of course, if the program consists of records likely to recall fond memories. In the final analysis, however, your use of the phonograph should depend on its effect upon your own study efficiency.

Outside Noise. An exciting football broadcast from a neighboring room, shouts accompanying a nearby volleyball game, traffic sounds from the street outside your window — these are outside noises over which you have little or no control. Furthermore, noise such as loud talking or singing is more meaningful, and hence more distracting than are such background noises as passing trains, trucks, and airplanes. Even though you are able to concentrate despite such noises, doing so requires added energy so that you tire of studying more quickly. If you are easily distracted by outside noise, change your place to a quieter spot or change your study time to a quieter time of day!

Visual Distractions

Your current sweetheart and favorite pin-up have one thing in common — their pictures are very likely to distract you from your studies. Both the surface of your desk and the space immediately surrounding your study area should be kept free of visual distractions such as trophies, mementos, pin-ups, magazines, photographs, etc. Glancing at such items may easily recall fond memories or set off a chain of thoughts, so that daydreaming replaces studying. You must be especially careful to eliminate such physical distractions from your study area since they can destroy your concentration by triggering off psychological distractions.

An equally distracting situation is produced by placing your desk so that it faces a window or door. Such an arrangement may afford you an excellent view of the campus or the hallway, but is unlikely to help you keep your mind on your studies. If you have a roommate, be certain that your desks do not face each other — such an arrangement is likely to produce more conversation than study.
cold will cause physical discomfort and lowered concentration. Therefore, you should try to keep your room temperature at about 70 degrees for maximum working efficiency.

Study Tools. Is your studying often interrupted because needed reference books or study materials are not on hand? Frequent interruptions to obtain needed items or hunt for missing things can only be avoided by systematic planning. The first step is to prepare a list of needed equipment, reference books, and study materials. The next step is to purchase the needed items and place them where they are easily obtainable from your desk. You should use a desk drawer for such items as paper, pencils, erasers, etc. A small bookcase might be desirable for your textbooks, dictionary, thesaurus, etc. The final step is to return items to their proper place after use. Of course, you must also remember to always replenish depleted material promptly.

STUDYING IN THE LIBRARY

Research has consistently demonstrated that the college library is the best place to study, especially for the student living off campus! This seems quite sensible when you remember that the library is built specifically for scholarly activity. There are fewer distractions – less temptation to put your studying aside – in the library than anywhere else. Also, the reference materials needed for outside assignments are often available only in the library.

Some students are so readily distracted, however, that they have trouble concentrating even in the library. If you are one of those who is constantly looking around the room for someone you know or would like to know, choose a seat facing a wall in the corner of the room and get down to business. Remember, the rules for minimizing distractions and maximizing concentration will work equally well in your room or in the library.

Auditory distractions, visual distractions, and disorganization must be controlled whenever you study or your concentration is certain to suffer. However, since controlling these may involve several persons other than yourself, you may prefer studying in the library to taking the necessary steps for improving study conditions in your room. Many students choose studying in the library to reorganizing their study environment because the latter might cause bad feelings with others. You might prefer the same solution if it will avoid creating ill-will with your family or friends.