

Improving Student Concentration and Memory

What is concentration?

Concentration is often associated with effective learning, and something that we only notice when it is lacking. For example, we might not notice how good our concentration skills are when focusing on our favourite television program, however, our lack of concentration seems more obvious when we can't read more than a few lines of a text book before our mind starts to wander.

We all have the ability to concentrate some of the time. The challenge is to recognise it as a skill or set of habits that we can develop.

Our ability to concentrate depends on:

- Our interest in the subject or activity
- Our motivation eg. to finish a task
- Our level of relaxation or enjoyment
- The level of distraction either from our environment (eg. noise), or from our own thoughts.

Expanding your concentration span

Our concentration span, or time we can concentrate on a specific task before our thoughts wander, will be different for different tasks. By practising the following skills we can extend our concentration span:

- Actively notice when your thoughts begin to wander, then say STOP to yourself and re-focus
- Focus on one thing for a time and actively ignore other things going on around you (eg. in a lecture, focus on the lecturer and cut out any other noises such as people coughing)
- Set a goal for what you would like to achieve in a specific study session. eg 'In the next 45 minutes I will read and highlight the key points in this article'
- Plan to concentrate by starting a study session with 'warm up' activities
- Check that your place of study is comfortable and free of distractions.
- Make sure you have all the books, notepaper, a glass of water or anything else you need
- When you need a break, have a stretch, or walk around the room, refresh your eyes by changing the focal distance eg. by looking out the window.
- Tackle activities and tasks that require the most concentration when you are mentally and physically fresh. Know what times of the day you are most alert and plan to work on the more difficult materials then.
- Playing particular types of classical music composed by the Baroque composers such as Handel, Vivaldi, and J.S. Bach has been found to induce the alpha state in our brain which is associated with relaxed alertness. This state of mind can aid the learning process.
- Read difficult material with a question in mind. This can help you sharpen your focus.

Use the SQ3R technique:

- ⇒ start by Skimming the whole chapter, article or book
- ⇒ then pose some Questions about what the author is trying to say
- ⇒ then Read actively or think about what you are reading by searching for answers to your questions
- ⇒ then Recite or answer the questions yourself in your own words
- ⇒ then Review your notes and look for gaps in your knowledge

Set small, manageable study goals and tackle one at a time

Reward yourself with a pleasant activity after you have had an effective study session

Dealing with specific issues

If you are having trouble concentrating because of personal worries, it can be helpful to set some time aside to focus on the problem. Perhaps make some time to talk to a friend, or contact a counsellor. After spending time sorting it out, relax and refresh yourself by changing tack (eg. going for a walk, watching TV) before sitting down to concentrate on your study again.

If your thoughts are wandering because the material is difficult to understand, it is a good idea to contact your lecturer and ask for clarification. You could also use the online discussion board in your units to share ideas or questions with other students.

Improving Memory

Do you know that we remember 20% of what we read, 30% of what we hear, 40% of what we see, 50% of what we say, 60% of what we do, and 90% of what we see, hear, say AND do? Effective memory and learning are achieved by making associations and being actively involved in the process.

- Make sure you understand what it is you want to learn or remember.
- Connect what you are learning with other information that you already know in as many different ways as possible, for example, draw a mind map, a diagram, or explain what you understand to someone else.
- Review or remind yourself of what you want to remember. Write key points on index cards and carry them with you to look at when you have a few minutes to spare. Use the cards to play a memory game, for example, write a question on one side and the answer on the other.
- After reading something that you want to learn, test yourself immediately, then 10 minutes later. Test yourself again before going to sleep, then again in the morning. Review after one week, then again in a month's time. By continuing to recall the material, you are strengthening the links to your long-term memory. Like any skill, practising will improve it.

Memory Aids

Memory aids can be external or internal. **External** aids are tools in our surroundings that we use to reinforce or trigger our memory. Some examples are:

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- Put up mind maps, summaries, diagrams on the wall where you study or in a place where you will see them often.
- Make a tape of what you are learning, then play it back to yourself. This can be particularly effective if you listen to it as you go off to sleep.
- Make up games or fun activities which test your knowledge.
- When learning words in a new language, stick notes on furniture etc with the word in the new language.
- **Internal** memory aids are strategies we use to recall material when we only have our memory to rely on, for example during an exam.
- If you need to learn something by heart you may be able to reduce the information to a simple code that you learn. Common examples of this are the order of mathematical operations in algebra BODMAS (Brackets, Of, Division, Multiplication, Addition, Subtraction) and ROYGBIV (the colours of the spectrum – red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet).
- When learning about processes, try creating a story where you can link images and words. For example, if you need to remember how digestion occurs in an animal, the story could be about an adventure of a person being shrunk, then swallowed. Using emotions and colour in the story add to the likelihood that it will be remembered.
- Re-creating the context for material can aid in learning. For example, if you need to remember a chemical equation it can be useful to recall when and how you did the experiment in a laboratory.

These are some of the ways we use our five senses to enhance and improve our memory. Any method that allows you to make the material you are learning more meaningful, personal or relevant to your life will help you remember.

When your mind goes blank

Have you ever noticed that you are more likely to find something when you are not really looking for it? Remembering seems to be related to having a relaxed mind. Having a memory block or going blank is more likely to happen when we are anxious or concentrating too hard. So it is important to take a few minutes to consciously relax. This can happen if you take a few deeper breaths, concentrating on the 'out' breath, so that you are slowing down your breathing rate. If possible have a stretch and change position before re-focusing on the question. In an exam, it can help to move on to another question as sometimes when you are thinking about something different, the answer to the earlier question pops into your mind.

Changing your beliefs about your memory

Are you aware of saying negative things about your memory, such as 'My memory is hopeless'? What you say to yourself **can** affect what you believe, even if it is not true for every situation. It is quite likely that there are times when you can recall things more easily than other times. So think about the times that you have been able to find something, or remembered something important eg. instead of saying 'I've forgotten my keys', try saying 'I've left my keys at home'. Then you will be reinforcing the belief that reflects the reality of the situation. You have actually **remembered** where you left your keys. As with all skills, the more we actively reinforce that we **can** remember things, the more likely we will recognise that our memory is working.

Conclusion

You know yourself the best, so recognise there are times when you can focus better than at other times. Use this information to plan your study sessions. Start with a specific goal in mind and build up your concentration span by extending the time you spend on one task. Also, the key to developing a good memory is contained in the old saying "use it or lose it". By using a variety of methods to practise remembering, you will find out what works best for you..

Further free information or support contact UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) on (02) 6773 2897 or email studentcounselling@une.edu.au or via [Ask UNE](#)

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