Six Step Guide for Improving Concentration

1. Do whatever is necessary to ensure that you understand what you are reading or studying.
   a. You will find it easier to concentrate while reading your textbook and while studying if you have kept up with your assignments. In one sense comprehension is the process of relating what you already know to what you are reading. If you know very little about what you are reading or studying, you will have difficulty comprehending it. And when you fail to comprehend, your thoughts are likely to wander. You can improve your ability to concentrate by building an understanding of course content day by day.
   b. Similarly, you will concentrate better if you relate what you are reading or studying to things that you already know outside the course. Your reading rate might drop somewhat if you do this, but in the long run you will spend less time in learning new information. By actively relating what you already know from other sources to what you are studying, you will be able to understand your assignment more easily and remember the information better. Because you are dealing successfully with the assignment, you will find it easier to concentrate.
   c. You should not allow yourself to go passively over material that you do not understand. If you are not following the reasoning, you are not making good use of your time. Make an effort to understand fully what you read. You might want to skim material initially, but eventually you should read it carefully and make certain that you follow the writer’s line of thought. You might even have to reread completely and rethink what you are studying. In any case, if you do not understand the material well, you will almost certainly have trouble maintaining concentration.

2. Try to maintain an interest in what you are studying.
   a. If you do not already have an interest in the course you are taking, try to develop an interest. One way is to discuss the course with someone who has taken it and enjoyed it. Also, a student who is interested in that subject area could probably give you ideas about why he/she is interested in the field and what can make the course more enjoyable for you. Another approach is to read magazine articles on assigned material, or watch a TV program or program segment on a study topic. At least, you can stay alert for interesting relationships between what you happen to read or see elsewhere and what you are studying.
   b. During each study session, try to develop an interest in what you are doing. Sometimes surveying or previewing the material will alert you to ideas and information of interest, which will heighten your ability to concentrate and comprehend. You will usually benefit by trying to focus on the material’s main points rather than allowing yourself to get lost in the details. Looking for the general principles and broad generalizations in a
chapter can often make it easier to concentrate because you know you are learning what is important.

c. Some students have trouble concentrating on their work because they think about things they would rather be doing – their studies are not interesting enough for them at the time. One way to avoid such daydreaming is to set aside time for the activities you particularly enjoy. Then, when you do sit down to study, you will be less prone to begin thinking to the other things that you have already done or have plans to do. You will know your work is not keeping you from enjoyable activities; it is simply getting the attention it deserves.

d. Another way to maintain interest while studying is to arrange for variety. That can mean studying for any one course only an hour or so at a time or by varying the types of activities included in a study session. You can read for an hour and then switch to writing. It helps to plan ahead for variety so you will not waste time trying to think up ways to provide it.

3. When studying, try to have a definite purpose in mind.

a. During study sessions, set goals in terms of what you want to accomplish, not simply in terms of time to spend. When you tell yourself, for instance, that you are going to study for an hour without deciding how much you are going to complete, you have no way to evaluate your effort.

b. The goals that you set should be ones that you have reason to think you can accomplish by pushing yourself. If you leave yourself too much to do during a cramming session or last-minute writing effort, you are likely to be distracted by thoughts of failure. On the other hand, if you set aside more time than you need, it is easy to let your mind wander. Most people work best when there is some pressure on them, but not too much.

c. When you do reading assignments, set short-term objectives for yourself. Many textbooks provide some at the beginning of each chapter. Or you might be able to use the chapter headings or the chapter summary to develop broad questions to answer. Some textbooks even have helpful subheadings that can be used for formulating questions to answer as you read through a chapter. If these textbook features do not help, you may have to skim ahead quickly as you read looking for words in boldface or other clues as to the important content. Then you will have a basis for formulating objectives that will keep you from reading aimlessly and help you maintain your concentration.

4. Do what you can to maintain a pattern of attentive work when studying.

a. If you begin to lose your concentration, you should not allow yourself to continue reading or working inattentively. It is easy to waste time while your mind wanders. When you fail to break the pattern quickly, you make it more difficult to begin concentrating again. Instead, either switch to a study activity on which you can focus your attention, or take a break. In fact, studying in short blocks, preferably 45 to 50 minutes followed by a 5 to 10 minute break, usually helps you maintain your attentiveness. Concentration tends to lag after an hour.
b. When distracting activity around you interferes with your work, you should not just sit and be upset. Try to deal with distractions directly. If someone is bothering you, move elsewhere or ask tactfully that she/he stop the distracting behavior. If there is nothing you can do about the distraction at the time, do not allow yourself to simply fume about it; it would be more productive to plan briefly some future solution to the problem. Your objective, in any case, should be to get your thoughts and efforts directed back toward your study task as soon as possible.

c. Sometimes worries and other concerns interfere with concentration. If you allow such thoughts to linger in your mind, you will have trouble achieving your study objectives. One countermeasure is to stop studying and decide what you can do about the problem. You can write down potential solutions and then decide on the best alternative. After you have decided, you should be able to redirect your thoughts to what you are studying. If you cannot think of anything you can do to resolve the problem, tell yourself that you are wasting time worrying. This may help you again concentrate on your study objectives.

5. Try to transform good study procedures into habits.

a. Having a study schedule or routine to follow will help you maintain regularity in your study procedures. This regularity in your study procedures will contribute to making those procedures become habits and you will have less trouble concentrating and doing your work.

b. When working out a study routine, arrange to study less interesting and more difficult material when you assume you will be able to concentrate easily. Most people have certain times of the day when they can expect to be more mentally alert. Reserving those times for the most challenging material leaves the more interesting and less difficult material for the times when you might not be fully alert. The resulting attentive study can then more easily develop into good study habits.

c. When you are first developing study procedures for a course, it pays to work in an environment that is not distracting for you. Then the study habits you develop will more likely be productive. On the other hand, if you begin forming your study habits under distracting conditions, those habits are unlikely to be efficient.

d. In general, good study procedures most readily become good habits when your place of study has the appropriate atmosphere. The location should be identified in your mind as a place of study and not as something else. Take breaks and carry on conversations elsewhere. Keep games, magazines, and other potential distractions in another location. Study materials, textbooks, and reference books, however, should be readily available so that you can avoid letting your mind stray while you look for something you need.

6. Try to ensure that you are rewarded for productive study.

a. One of the most effective rewards for productive study is good grades, and yet some students spend little time deciding on how to best study to obtain the grades they want. If your efforts do not produce the marks you want and think you deserve, you may find it
difficult to concentrate on your work. Although grades are certainly not everything in education, good grades do help most people continue working productively. Therefore, direct some of your attention toward identifying what you can do to get good grades for your effort.

b. Good students whose efforts and successes go unnoticed find it increasingly difficult to concentrate and work hard. It does not usually pay to go around bragging about good performance in courses, but neither does it pay for a person to conceal the fact that she/he has done well. You can create opportunities for praise and take advantage of that praise without depending on it.

c. During study sessions, you should reward yourself for accomplishing your goals. One of the best ways is to take a relaxing, refreshing break after completing a task as planned. If you continue working without rewarding productive efforts, your thoughts will begin to wander, and in the future you will probably find it more difficult to study efficiently.

d. One of the most rewarding outcomes of study can be recognizing that you have learned something. You may feel that some things you are expected to learn are of little importance and, therefore, should not have to be learned. Nevertheless, most of the knowledge and abilities that may seem unimportant now will probably prove valuable in the future. Instead of spending time wondering why you have to learn something, devote that time to studying and then be pleased with that knowledge or ability. Recognizing that you have accomplished a study task can make it easier to concentrate in the future.

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