

**Counselling &  
Learning Support**  
North Vancouver Campus

**Student Success  
Workshops**

# Concentration Strategies



BR267

604.984.1744

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Prepared by:

Alison Parry, Learning Specialist

## Improving Your Concentration

Concentration is the ability to block out distractions so you can focus your mind on one specific item or task. Concentration is needed to pay attention to lectures, do your readings, and complete assignments. While some people are able to maintain their concentration no matter what, many others find themselves concentrating one minute and then becoming easily distracted and unfocused the very next. As a result, to enhance concentration it is necessary to control your stress levels, establish an appropriate physical environment in which to study, and use strategies to help you get focused and stay focused while you study.

### Create a Suitable Study Space

To increase your ability to concentrate, give careful attention to your physical environment. The noise level, lighting, and work space can directly affect your ability to concentrate. An ideal study area has few or no distractions that will affect your concentration.

#### The Noise Level

Studying, comprehending, and thinking critically involve complex thought processes. An environment filled with noise disrupts the thought processes and mental focus. As you strive to increase your ability to concentrate, use any of the following suggestions to create an environment that has a level of noise conducive to effective studying:

1. Turn off your cell phone while you are studying and choose to study in an environment that has as few distractions as possible. At school, many students use the library. At home, study in a room where there is no television or computer.
2. Use earplugs or a headset to create silence if you work best in a quiet environment.
3. Turn on a small fan or play soft, classical music if you are distracted by silence. These gentle sounds create a buffer between you and the rest of the environment. Research shows that soft, classical and instrumental music (especially Baroque music) is conducive to learning; the music positively alters brainwave patterns (alpha waves) and assists the learning process by creating a relaxed, receptive state of mind.
4. Study in a consistent place both at home and at school. You will habituate to the noises and distractions in that environment so are better able to tune them out.

#### The Lighting

Proper lighting is important in any study area. If you have too little light, your eyes can easily become strained and tired. Some lighting can create shadows or glare on your books. To avoid many of the problems created by poor lighting, have two sources of light in your study area.

This may include an overhead light and a desk lamp or two lamps in different locations. Two sources of lighting may seem like a minor detail, but sometimes ignoring small details leads to big problems.

## The Work Space

Attention to your work space at home and at school results in the most effective and productive use of your study time. The following techniques can help you create an ideal work space to promote concentration:

1. Sit on a comfortable chair at a table or desk that has a work surface with enough room to spread out your books, notebook, paper, and necessary supplies. Sitting on a couch, in a recliner, or on a bed is not conducive to the level of concentration needed for effective studying.
2. Take time to remove clutter from your work surface. A table or desk that is cluttered with bills, correspondence, or materials for hobbies creates instant distractions.
3. Place your desk so it faces a wall and not a window to reduce the number of visual distractions
4. To avoid having to get up, equip your study area with basic supplies for studying. Organize your study area at home using file folders for important papers and small boxes, trays, or drawers for items such as pens, pencils, highlighting pens, a calculator, a spell checker, a stapler, index cards, and paper clips. Organize your study area at school by equipping your backpack with the same essential supplies.

## Stay Focused While You Study

Concentration is a mental process affected by your physical environment and your physical, emotional, and attitudinal states. The following strategies will help you stay focused while you study:

### Be an Active Learner

Active learning means you are actively involved in the learning process which promotes critical thinking, multisensory learning, and greater comprehension. You can combat many internal distracters such as feeling sleepy, bored uninterested or unmotivated by becoming more of a participant in the learning process. All of the following learning strategies are used by active learners and can enhance your concentration:

1. Have a pen in your hand when you study. Take notes, write questions, or jot down lists of information you need to learn.
2. Use markers to highlight important information in the textbook or in your notes.
3. Talk our loud (recite) as you study to activate your auditory channel and improve both concentration and comprehension.

4. Write summaries or make other kinds of study tools such as visual mappings, hierarchies, flash cards, or comparison charts.
5. Quiz yourself on the material you are studying. Write or recite questions and answers.

## Use Goal-Setting Techniques

Goal-setting techniques help you organize and prioritize your tasks, focus your mind, and create a plan of action. To increase your level of concentration, use the following goal-setting techniques:

1. Create a **list of things to do** at the beginning of each study block by identifying what needs to be done during the study block and organizing the tasks or assignments in order of priority. Create a motivational reward for yourself upon successful completion of the study block.
2. For large assignments, or assignments that will require several study blocks to complete, use the **chunking technique**, which involves breaking an assignment into sections. With chunking, longer or more detailed assignments become manageable. Rather than feeling frustrated or overwhelmed, you will become more motivated and confident that the situation is under control.
3. Create a **study ritual** or routine to use each time you study. Having a ritual can save time and confusion by allowing you to get started quickly. A study ritual helps you more directly into the mindset needed to study. For example, your ritual might be to use a quick relaxation or visualization technique, create a task schedule, and do a warm-up.

## Use Techniques to Deal with Internal and External Distractions

Sometimes, despite establishing an appropriate environment and mind set for studying, you will still find yourself getting distracted and losing concentration. In these cases you need to take action and apply strategies to get yourself back on track and refocused on the task at hand. Below are several strategies for getting re-focused when you need to.

1. **Take charge:** Accept responsibility for the distraction by taking charge of your situation. If you cannot control the noise level around you, rather than blame others, *take charge* by moving to another location. If the distraction is the phone, the television, or an uncomfortable work space, *take charge* by altering your environment. Let the phone ring, unplug it, or turn on an answering machine. Turn off the television. Choose a more comfortable work space or take time to make the existing space comfortable.
2. **Say no:** Sometimes ridding yourself of a distraction is as easy as saying *no*. When friends or family members ask you to drop your study schedule and participate in an activity with them, show your assertiveness by simply saying *no*. Inform them of the times that you are available.

3. **Red bow:** Frequently other people are distracters. They interrupt your studying and break your concentration. On your door or in your study area, place a red bow or any other item or symbol to signal to others that you are studying and you want privacy. Ask them to respect your request for no interruptions unless an emergency occurs.
4. **No need:** For minor noises or movement, you can use the no need technique to train yourself not to look up and not to break your concentration to attend to minor occurrences that are familiar. For example, if you study in the library, you know that occasionally someone will walk by, pull out a chair, or turn the pages of a book. Without looking, you know the source of the distraction, so force yourself to keep your eyes on you own work. Tell yourself, “There is *no need* to look.”
5. **Checkmark:** Each time you lose your concentration, make a checkmark on a score card you keep on your desk. At the end of your study block, count the number of checks. Set a goal each time you study to reduce the number of checkmarks.
6. **Mental storage box:** Before you begin studying, identify any concerns, worries, or emotions that might interrupt your concentration. Place them inside an imaginary box. Put the lid on the box and mentally shove the box aside for the time being. Tell yourself that you will deal with the contents of the box at a more appropriate time, and then do so. Another approach is to write down your disruptive thoughts and feelings returning to deal with the list at a later time.
7. **Tunnel vision:** Picture yourself at the beginning of a tunnel that has a yellow line running down the middle. You want to stay on the middle line. As soon as your mind starts to wander, picture yourself swiftly getting back to the middle line before you bump against the walls.

## Manage Your Stress Levels

Being a student can be stressful. When you experience too much stress or are not coping well with stress, you will likely have trouble concentrating. As a result, using the stress management techniques mentioned below will help improve your concentration levels:

### Build and Maintain Health

- ◆ **Nutrition**  
Eat nutritious foods. Too much caffeine, salt, fat, refined sugar and alcohol can have a negative effect.
- ◆ **Sleep**  
Try to get a good night's sleep. Things often seem much worse when you're overtired.
- ◆ **Exercise**  
Regular exercise helps you to reduce tension, clear your mind and resist stress.

## Change the Situation

- ◆ ***Time Management***  
If you're feeling overwhelmed and as if you never have enough time, learning some time management techniques will help.
- ◆ ***Be assertive***  
Learn to say "no" to things you don't want to do. This frees up time and insures that you're attending to your own priorities, rather than someone else's.
- ◆ ***Slow down***  
Do less and do it better. See above to remember your priorities.
- ◆ ***Use resources***  
Know what resources are available to help you deal with the stress in your life. Make use of the resources on campus such as the Counselling Department.
- ◆ ***Math Learning Centre and Writing Centre***
- ◆ ***Support System***  
Spend time with people who are supportive and understanding. Have fun with them.

## Change your Body Response

- ◆ ***Relaxation***  
It's impossible to be both tense and relaxed at the same time, so learn how to relax. Meditate. Take a warm bath. Listen to music. Find what works for you and try to do it on a daily basis.
- ◆ ***Breathing***  
We tend to breathe more quickly and take shallow breaths when we're under stress. A simple method of practising slow, gentle, deep breathing can bring considerable relief.

## Change your Thoughts

- ◆ ***Positive Self-Talk***  
Our thoughts and the messages we give ourselves can have a major effect on our feelings and even on our physiological reactions. So be supportive of yourself, rather than blaming or criticizing. Be aware of irrational thoughts and pointless worrying.
- ◆ ***Sense of Humour***  
Humour has been found to be an excellent antidote for stress. So remember to laugh at yourself and at life occasionally. It helps to get a different perspective on your situation.
- ◆ ***Talk to Someone***  
Sometimes, talking to a friend or family member is sufficient to get a different perspective on things. At other times, talking to a professional, such as a counsellor, can help you identify thought patterns that are contributing to your stress.

If you need more information or help with managing your stress, please contact Counselling & Learning Support (Birch 267 or phone 604.984.1744) to make an appointment with a counsellor or to find out about additional publications about stress management that are available for loan or reference.

## Conclusion

As you can see, there are many ways students can improve their concentration levels. Like all study strategies, you will need to experiment with these techniques and then select those that work most effectively for you. The more frequently you use the techniques, the more comfortable you will be activating them when the need arises.

If you need any further help learning how to deal with your concentration problems or these strategies do not seem to be working for you, please contact the Learning Specialist by calling 604-984-1744 or make an appointment in-person by coming to Birch 267 (Counselling & Learning Support).

**The content of this handout has been adapted from Linda Wong's *Essential Study Skills 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2003), Chapter 5 Increasing Concentration, Decreasing Stress, and Procrastination* and includes material from the Capilano University Counselling Department handout called "*Strategies for Managing Stress*".**