Concentration

Concentration: the ability to direct your thinking

The art or practice of concentration, no matter if studying biology or playing pool, is to focus on the task at hand and eliminate distraction.

We all have the ability to concentrate -- sometimes. Think of the times when you were "lost" in something you enjoy: a sport, playing music, a good game, a movie. Total concentration.

But at other times,

- Your mind wanders from one thing to another
- Your worries distract you
- Outside distractions take you away before you know it
- The material is boring, difficult, and/or not interesting to you.
- See the Flash distraction (needs high speed connection)

These tips may help: They involve

1. What you can control in your studies
2. Best practices

What you can control in your studies:

- "Here I study"
  Get a dedicated space, chair, table, lighting and environment
  Avoid your cell phone or telephone
  Put up a sign to avoid being disturbed or interrupted
  If you like music in the background, OK, but don't let it be a distraction. (Research on productivity with music versus without music is inconclusive)
- Stick to a routine, efficient study schedule
  Accommodate your day/nighttime energy levels
  See our Guide on Setting goals and making a scheduling
- Focus
  Before you begin studying, take a few minutes to summarize a few objectives, gather what you will need, and think of a general strategy of accomplishment
- Incentives
  Create an incentive if necessary for successfully completing a task, such as calling a friend, a food treat, a walk, etc.
  For special projects such as term papers, design projects, long book reviews, set up a special incentive
- Change topics
  Changing the subject you study every one to two hours for variety
• **Vary your study activities**
  Alternate reading with more active learning exercises
  If you have a lot of reading, try the *SQ3R method*
  Ask yourself how you could increase your activity level while studying?
  Perhaps a group will be best? Creating study questions?
  Ask your teacher for alternative strategies for learning. The more active
  your learning, the better.

• **Take regular, scheduled breaks that fit you**
  Do something different from what you've been doing (e.g., walk around if
  you've been sitting), and in a different area

• **Rewards**
  Give yourself a reward when you've completed a task

**Best Practices:**

• **You should notice improvement in a few days**
  But like any practice, there will be ups, levels, and downs:

• **It will benefit other activities you do!**

Do not try to keep particular thoughts out of your mind. For example, as you sit there, close your
eyes and think about anything you want to for the next three minutes except cookies. Try not to
think about cookies...When you try not to think about something, it keeps coming back. ("I'm not
going to think about cookies. I'm not going to think about cookies.")

You might do this hundreds of times a week. Gradually, you'll find that the period of time
between your straying thoughts gets a little longer every few days. So be patient and keep at it.
You'll see some improvement!

Do not constantly judge your progress. Take it easy on yourself. Good practice is enough to say
that you did it, and that you are on the road. The mind is always different and the practice
unfolds over time with many ups and downs.

**Worry or Think Time**
Research has proven that people who use a worry time find themselves worrying 35 percent less
of the time within four weeks.

1. **Set aside a specific time each day to think about**
   the things that keep entering your mind and interfering with
   your concentration.

2. **When you become aware of a distracting thought,**
   remind yourself that you have a special time to think about
   them,

3. **Let the thought go,** perhaps with "Be here now,"

4. **Keep your appointment** to worry or think about those
   distracting issues
For example, set 4:30 to 5 p.m. as your worry/think time. When your mind is side-tracked into worrying during the day, remind yourself that you have a special time for worrying. Then, let the thought go for the present, and return your focus to your immediate activity.

**Tallying your mental wanderings.**

Have a 3 x 5 inch card handy. Draw two lines dividing the card into three sections. Label them "morning," "afternoon," and "evening."

Each time your mind wanders, make a tally in the appropriate section. Keep a card for each day. As your skills build, you'll see the number of tallies decrease.

**Maximize your energy level**

When is your energy level at its highest? When are your low energy times? Study your most difficult courses at your high energy times. Sharpest early in the evening? Study your most difficult course then. Later in the evening? Work on your easier courses or the ones you enjoy the most.

Most students put off the tough studies until later in the evening when they become tired, and it is more difficult to concentrate. Reverse that. Study hard subjects at peak energy times; easier ones later. This alone can help to improve your concentration.

**Visualize**

As an exercise before you begin studying, think of those times when concentration is not a problem for you--no matter what situation. Now try to feel or image yourself in that situation. Recapture that experience immediately before your studies by placing yourself in that moment... Repeat before each study session.

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Help Yourself. [http://www.k-state.edu/counseling/concentr.html](http://www.k-state.edu/counseling/concentr.html) University Counseling Services, Kansas State University.

**See also** J. R. Hayes, *The Complete Problem Solver*. Franklin Institute Press, 198

[www.studygs.net](http://www.studygs.net)