

**Bureau for Student Counselling & Career Development**  
**Study skills pamphlets**

## **Concentration**

Are you one of those students who often complains about a lack of concentration? The following might help you to learn new techniques to improve your concentration.

### **What is concentration?**

Concentration means being able to apply all your senses to what you are doing.

### **Common problems**

Q: I sit for an hour reading in my textbook and then I cannot remember what I have read.

A: At first you have a study method problem. You do not read a textbook, you study a textbook by using a study method (e.g. ET) where you study actively with all your senses, using pen and paper and memory skills.

Q: I love music and most of the time I cannot leave my music to start studying.

A: You have a discipline and a motivation problem. Use your music as a reward after you have studied a planned piece of work e.g. a chapter or completed an assignment.

Q: I have problems at home which distract me from my studies.

A: This is a common problem which many students have to face. Problems do not go away on their own. They must be solved or your attitude towards them has to be changed. Study the guidelines in the preconditions for concentration.

### **Preconditions**

#### *Time Management*

Plan to study in shorter sessions. No person can concentrate for too long. Use a weekly schedule (see time management).

#### *Short-term objectives & goal-directedness*

Set clear objectives for each study period. Use your weekly schedule to plan for specific subjects and specific pieces of work to be done.

#### *A study method*

Use an effective study method. A study method will guide your study and force you to concentrate and to apply the principles of effective studying.

#### *Positive & motivated attitude*

Use your desire to learn and to better your position by studying. Have a positive attitude towards your studies, and work for success.

### *Emotional preparedness*

Not many people can concentrate when they are emotionally upset. The reasons for their emotional state could be domestic problems, financial problems, marital problems, illness, work-related problems, pressure from family, anxiety about failure, etc. Whatever the cause of the problems, you have to cope with them if you want to concentrate on your studies. Use the following guidelines in trying to cope with your problems:

*Make a list of all your problems – analyse them.*

Get as much information on the problem as possible – read about it – talk to friends/family. Draw up an action plan and execute it. If the problem cannot be solved e.g. if you do not like your in-laws or your boss – change your attitude to one of acceptance. If you cannot solve your problems yourself, contact the peer helpers or the student counsellor.

## **Concentration strategies**

### *General techniques*

Take a short break and try a brief energetic walk, a run around the block, a cup of tea or a short chat with a friend.

### *The 5-minute rule*

When you cannot get started. There may be times when, despite your best efforts, you just cannot force yourself to commence your daily study session. When this happens, merely sit down at your desk for five minutes with the relevant study material in front of you. Nine times out of ten you will find that, by merely sitting down, you will have overcome your mental block to the work and can continue without further difficulty. During the five minutes, do some routine tasks, such as filing lecture notes, paging through the chapter and making a mind map.

### *Sustaining concentration*

(a) When your mind just starts wandering. When studying intensely, you occasionally become aware you are distracted by something and feel impatient with your work. Set your self another five minutes in which to work. If your impatience still persists, give in to it. Take a short break while you physically loosen up – stand up and stretch, walk around, consciously relax. Leave your study spot for five minutes – get a drink, glance through the window, organise your desk. Start again.

(b) When you have been studying for a long time, your concentration is diminished and can't be rejuvenated by a short break. You need to recharge mentally. Remotivate yourself by reviewing the material you have just covered and try to get an overall picture of it. This often gives you a feeling of achievement as well as reminding you why you are studying a particular topic. Look ahead at what you intend to do next. Preview the rest of the book or chapter. Jot down ideas for the next section of an assignment. Switch to another subject and

work on that until it becomes stale, then return to your first subject or go on to a third.  
Total loss – Review/ Replan/ Relax

There is no point in believing you are studying when you are simply staring at the work on a page, when you repeatedly can't find the words you want, or when your mind is far away.

(a) When you feel you are losing concentration, review what you have been studying. If your task is part of a large piece of work, think about where the part fits into the whole and which part you will tackle next.

(b) Decide when you will study again – in an hour's time, the next morning, a day later.

(c) Stop studying and relax. Reward yourself by doing something you enjoy.

### *The "stop" technique*

As soon as you notice that your thoughts are wandering, say to yourself "STOP". This should make you notice that you've not been concentrating. You should then try to find out why you were not concentrating so that you can do something to rectify the situation.

### *Positive thinking & positive self-talk*

If you find that negative thoughts interfere with your attention, identify exactly what they are and change them into positive thoughts. Let's say you find yourself not concentrating, and thinking: "This work is so boring, I really don't know why I waste on time with it".

Transform this negative thought into a positive one by saying to yourself: "This work can be interesting if I try to make it interesting. I'm going to make a conscious effort to make it lively and interesting".

Once you've done this, you'll be more motivated and you'll find it much easier to concentrate. It is important to note that during this study period you'll be in constant conversation with yourself. This is a natural and important process, and by talking to yourself you ensure that your attention is focused on your studies.

Conclusion: practice to become aware of and to create your own study patterns and to discover the concentration techniques that you find most helpful. Being in control of when and how you study is crucial to learning independently.

### **Further CONCENTRATION resources on the Internet**

- Concentration & Distraction (University of Waterloo, Canada)  
<http://www.adm.uwaterloo.ca/infocs/Study/concentration.html>
- Concentration - Some basic guidelines (Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University)  
<http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/concentr.html>

This document is available on-line at: <https://sol.unisa.ac.za/counselling/>.

Unisa Bureau for Student Counselling & Career Development

E-mail: [counselling@unisa.ac.za](mailto:counselling@unisa.ac.za)