

The keys to success

**EFFECTIVE
WORK HABITS**

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First thing's first: Concentrate!

Though the news might disappoint anyone looking for the secret recipe for academic success, there is no guaranteed study method - there are as many ways of studying as there are students.

Nevertheless, since all intellectual work requires a minimum level of concentration, there are certain ground rules.

Concentration is the act of directing all of your mental energy toward one object. **It is not passive. In fact, it requires you to mobilize your mental energy to focus your attention on the task at hand.**

Because of this, intellectual work can rapidly exhaust students who don't adequately prepare themselves.

Luckily, you can maximize the effectiveness of your study sessions and maintain your quality of life while minimizing the mental resources you allocate to concentration. The factors that influence one's level of concentration are generally classified

according to whether they derive from the work environment (external factors) or personal dispositions (internal factors).

Choosing your work environment

Choosing a positive work environment will help you maintain maximum concentration as long as possible.

The idea here is simple: **the attention that we give to our surroundings is subtracted from the attention we dedicate to our work.** The more distractions, the more effort you'll need just to think about studying!

Here are some aspects of your work environment that you can control.

Choose a place that is conducive to concentration. Some people can study even in the hubbub of a crowded bus. Obviously, such students are in the minority. For everyone else, choosing a peaceful and familiar spot will reduce your chances of being interrupted. Good lighting and solid back support (save your favourite chair for relaxing!) will also promote better intellectual work.

What about music? Listening to music can sometimes help people who are afraid of their thoughts "wandering" while they work. Nevertheless, you should choose appropriate background music. A well-known, foot-tapping rhythm would be a good choice. Avoid the radio - announcers and hosts are paid to grab your attention!

Reserve an area for work. Does your desk always seem to have random things piled up on it? Before settling down to work, make sure you put everything not required for your planned study session to the side (that means grocery lists, magazines, photos, etc.). Next, make sure you have all the tools you'll need nearby (dictionary, pencils and hi-liters, course packs, etc.).

If your computer is in your work space, turn the screen off when you're not planning on using it. This way you'll be less tempted to check your e-mail.

Preparing for intellectual work.

Since it isn't our usual state of mind, concentration can be a fragile thing. **When you're concentrating, you're asking**

your mind to leave a pleasant resting state for demanding work. If you feel like your concentration is lacking, take a look at our guide to motivation and time management.

Here's some advice on enhancing your studying abilities.

A balanced lifestyle. This is the greatest gift university students can give themselves! Lack of sleep and physical exercise as well as stress make concentrating much more difficult.

Warm-up exercises. To concentrate, you have to gradually immerse your mind in what you're focusing on. Implementing a brief routine to prepare yourself can help you get there. You can clean up your work space, look over useful terms and ideas, or perform relaxation exercises (see our guide to stress management).

By associating this sequence of activities with your desire to work, you'll teach your mind to concentrate more quickly and easily.

Dispelling parasite-ideas. Parasite-ideas are those stubborn thoughts that can take the form of pleasant daydreams (it's so

tempting to plan your activities for the weekend!) or ill-timed worries (e-mails to answer, clothing to wash, discussion to finish with a loved one, etc.).

It's better to start your study sessions after you've dealt with the different issues that might monopolize your attention. When these parasite-ideas come up during your work, don't try to push them away. They'll likely come back to haunt you. Rather, note them down. You'll be able to use your next study break to take care of the tasks that are eating away at your concentration.

Take regular breaks. To avoid overloading your brain, give yourself a brief break after each hour of work. You can use this time to drink water and stretch your legs. When you're working at a computer, it's desirable to turn your eyes away from the screen every twenty minutes.

The following pages contain several examples of work habits that might help you get the most out of your concentration.



Effective note-taking

During lecture courses, a lot of information is only made accessible orally.

Often it's not enough to understand the ideas discussed. You must also be able to remember them in detail after several weeks or even a month.

Some students don't like to take notes during presentations because they're afraid of not being able to pay enough attention to the teacher's words.

They'll probably be surprised to learn that taking notes encourages concentration and makes memorization easier! With practice, you'll be able to reap the full benefits of active listening.

The most effective note-taking methods tend to respect these three golden rules:

Brief notes

During a presentation, it's impossible to write everything down. Luckily, that's rarely necessary.

Course notes bring out what's essential in a lecture. Only the most important definitions and charts should be taken down in full. You can also transcribe examples that help you understand in your own words.

Moreover, once a concept is understood, you can easily note down just the main ideas and articulations ("because," "is the cause of," "and then," etc.).

Abbreviations will save you time, as long as you can recognize them afterwards. When you use a new abbreviation, write its meaning in the margins.

Faithful notes

When it comes to note-taking, accuracy and readability count as much as speed.

Preparing yourself for class will free up your mind to pay more attention to the transcription of ideas. Reread your notes from the previous lecture and any relevant texts before each class. This way you'll be able to stay "connected" for longer, and you'll reduce your risk of making mistakes (and of headaches!).

It's important not to confuse course notes and personal commentary. When you add your own ideas, do so between brackets or as footnotes.

Take the time to reread your writing after the course, or even that evening! You'll be able to pick out what questions you might want to ask the teacher at the next course in order to fill any holes in your notes.

Well-organized notes

Your course note should help you study the course material quickly and easily.

Some teachers give students access to their multimedia presentations. In that case, all you have to do is print out each slide and complement it with your own notes. If that's not possible, then write on loose-leaf paper.

By using only the front of each sheet, you'll be able to keep the back for adding comments or complementing your notes during the next course. Keep the margins clear as well. You can use them to highlight important ideas when studying.

It's important to be able to easily recognize where the discussion of each idea begins and ends. This is why it's best to divide your notes into paragraphs. When concepts are being listed, structure them in a numbered list in your notes.

Remember that by regularly rereading your notes, you'll notice what needs improvement in your note-taking methods. This way, you'll be sure to get the best results possible on your exam.

Effective reading

Just as with your ability to concentrate, your reading will be affected by the

conditions you're reading in and your personal inclination to reading at the time you choose to.

It's easy to distinguish the effective reader from the novice.

Inexperienced readers will set to work and not stop until they've finished the very last word of the last sentence in their text. However, effective readers will ask themselves questions before, during and after their readings.

Different ways of reading for different situations

Effective readers can adapt their reading style to their needs and constraints. They read selectively to give themselves a foretaste of the text's contents.

When experienced readers want to be more informed, they do background reading. They read the text at a normal rhythm to get a minimal understanding of it.

If they need to read the text for an exam or for an assignment, effective readers will read actively. This is when they will annotate the material and examine its structure to gain a deeper understanding.

The following strategies might help you perfect your active reading technique so you can get the most out of your readings.

Active reading

Preparation. To fully understand a text, you need to prepare to read it. You'll kill two birds with one stone, since this step will also help gather your concentration.

It's useful to make connections between your readings and the objectives of your course. If the reading is meant to complement material already seen in class, first review your notes on the concepts that will be explored in the text.

Overview. Bulkier books often contain a table of contents, a preface and an introduction.

Skimming the title of each section (in shorter texts) or the table of contents (for longer ones) allows you to preview the new ideas you'll have to pay more attention to during your reading. You can also predict how chapters will be organized, which will make note-taking easier.

The goal of an introduction is to introduce readers to the subject of the text while also arousing their interest. It's a good starting point when your motivation is lacking!

Finally, the preface is meant to present the author's point of view. Reading the preface will help you get used to the text's distinctive traits.

Understanding the author's message.

Be sure that you've completely understood each paragraph before moving on to the next. Unlike course lectures, written works can be reread as often as necessary. Take advantage of this!

Bear in mind the author's goal. You should draw out the message of the text in light of the author's point of view.

Identifying important sections.

The goal of this step is to make rereading the material easier once you know more about your exams.

It's better to underline important passages in pencil first (keep your hi-liters for a second reading). In the margins, you can note key

words and information that will help you link the text to your course notes.

The secret to effectively annotating a text is finding a balance between underlined sections and the rest of the text. Remember: it is not necessary to underline more than 10% of a text.

Summaries. It can be useful to go back over what you've learned after a reading session.

There are two methods you might choose from. On the one hand, you can make a summary of all of the important points in the text, relying on your annotations. When you're getting ready for your exams, all you'll have to do is reread your summaries.

On the other hand, you could also make a summary of the text by explaining it to an imaginary classroom. Take note of the questions you can't answer. You'll be able to pose them to your teachers or colleagues, or look in a book or online resource for an answer.

By following these five steps, you'll be able to take ownership of the majority of the

academic texts you read. Soon, you'll be an effective reader too!



Studying

There's no secret to effective studying: you have to devote time and concentration to it.

Successful students know that to prepare for an exam, you have to start well in advance.

Studying itself is only the final step in your preparations. It should be preceded by good class participation (active listening and note-taking) and regular study of the material (rereading, summaries, exercises).

By methodically preparing yourself for memorization, you'll gain time and improve your academic results (a great way to make a return on invested effort!).

Why do we have the impression that we know a subject by heart at the end of a course, only to find out later that we remember only the smallest amount of what was said the day before? The answer lies in the very structure of memory.

The secrets of memory

It's well-known that memory is a faculty that forgets. It's likely that if people make no effort to memorize them, they will forget 98% of what is taught to them within a month. That's a number that should make even the most knowledgeable students shiver...

Some people say they have no memory. In fact, they're framing the issue wrong. We have not one but two kinds of memory,

and each plays a distinct role in memorization.

Long-term memory. You might compare this kind of memory to a computer's hard drive. Information that enters your long-term memory has a much higher chance of remaining accessible for a long time after being learnt.

Long-term memory stocks information by connecting it to other ideas or by classing it in preexisting categories. This is why it's useful to make connections between new ideas and old ones.

Short-term memory. Short-term memory is also called working memory. All of the information that we're conscious of passes through the short-term memory. Unfortunately, it can only store so much information, and only for a limited time.

The challenge for students consists in moving a maximum of relevant information from their short-term to long-term memory.

How can I make memorization easier?

The ability to memorize is influenced by four important factors: the method used, the degree of concentration, motivation for the task, and the knowledge that one already has in the field.

In general, you're in direct control of the first three factors. There are several ways to enhance your performance during a study session.

Plan your studying. When studying for an exam, it's necessary to reread relevant documents and course notes several times. It's to your advantage to plan your studying for an exam well enough in advance to have time for a sufficient number of study sessions.

The more you study, the more completely you'll remember ideas you've learnt, because they'll become anchored in your long-term memory.

Prepare the information that must be memorized. When beginning to study, people often have to look back over their course notes and their reading summaries

in light of information about what will be on the exam. Now is the time to break out your hi-lighters to energize your studying.

Organize the material in a logical way..

The better organized the material, the more easily remembered. You can draw up diagrams or charts if the material lends itself to that. Vocabulary lists are best placed in a logical order. You can do so, for example, by composing acronyms.

Acronyms are short phrases or sentences that help you remember the first letters of a list (for example, Roy G. Biv, for the colours of the rainbow: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet).

It's important to find connections between the different things you need to memorize. When you're looking for an idea, you'll be able to follow those connections to remember the information in question.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. This is the only way to make information pass from the short-term memory into the long-term memory.

You have several options. You can recite your summaries out loud. Adopting a

particular rhythm can stimulate memory. Recopying notes also helps. A piece of information must be repeated three times for you to be able to retain it. Finally, you can always practice, alone or with the help of a colleague. By asking each other questions, you'll be able to see how effective both of your study habits are.

Memorization is always one of the most difficult parts of a course. Nevertheless, by planning your study sessions in advance and making sure you have a maximum level of concentration, you can avoid a great deal of end-of-semester stress.

Writing

People rarely start writing a sentence without knowing what they want to say. That seems obvious enough!

You won't be surprised, then, to learn that it's not advisable to start writing a paper before you have an overall vision of the message you want to communicate.

It's important to think about the goal of your paper before you write, since if your

message changes, the form of your paper will too.

You should choose the type of paper you want to write according to whether your goal is to inform or to convince your readers.

Different papers for different purposes

Here's a brief outline of short texts that every university student should recognize.

The **summary** and the **book report** are papers written about other texts or events. Their goal is to explain the content of those texts or events. Such papers are considered informative. You wouldn't expect to find the student's opinion in them; rather, you'd want to find the author's.

Commentaries and **critical summaries** are also papers written about other texts, but they include evaluative elements based on the ideas they explain. More often than not, the summary section and the critique need to be very clearly differentiated so that readers don't confuse the student's opinion with the author's.

Finally, **persuasive papers** and **personal reflections** are meant to explain a personal position on a subject. Because of this, they're based on solid, nuanced argumentation, rather than on the summary of another author's ideas.

Every teacher will have their own expectations for papers. This is why we recommend that you always make sure that the instructions for papers have been very clearly explained before you start. Taking this measure will spare you some major headaches!

If you'd like to improve your writing habits, here is some useful advice.

Writing strategies

Plan it out. A outline is like a road map. It helps you visualize the path you need to follow.

The map tells you how to get from Point A to Point B efficiently. In the same way, an outline should help you move from one idea to the next in a logical way.

Papers usually include an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The central part of

a paper especially benefits from good planning. For each main idea, identify the subthemes you'd like to discuss. For each subtheme, identify the arguments, explanations and examples you'd like to use.

An outline will let you have an overall view of the final product at any time. Refer back to your outline often to make sure your paper is still moving in the right direction. You can also rework your paper without worrying about forgetting something. That should help you concentrate!

A paragraph for each idea. To make sure each idea communicated is explained competently, start a new paragraph whenever you start discussing a new idea. Editing the paper will be that much easier (and it will be easier for the person marking as well!).

Structure your paragraphs like small papers. Each paragraph should introduce an idea, develop it, and then conclude by connecting it to the main idea of the next paragraph.

Write short sentences. The ideas discussed in university-level papers are generally quite complex. It's better to avoid

long sentences and figures of speech that might uselessly complicate your paper.

Pick the right word. When you're writing a university-level paper, it's important to pay attention to the words you use. Many terms are not interchangeable, since they are related to other ideas or belong to different approaches.

Reread your paper. Never hand a paper in without having first edited it, both for form and content! (At least not if you care about your grade!) And never edit a paper right after writing it.

Writing is a cycle that starts and ends with reading: reflection, writing, rest, rereading, and then you restart. It's pointless to try to rush the process. It's better to plan several writing sessions and to stop when your concentration fails you.

Hopefully this advice will help you write the more common kinds of university papers more easily. If you decide to go on to graduate studies, or if you have to write a more complicated paper, you should get a guide to research methodology. It will save you time - no point in reinventing the wheel!

Conclusion

You've probably noticed that success is not just a question of intelligence. It's largely a matter of choosing the right methods that will help you accomplish your assignments in the most efficient way (for you).

Adopting new work habits might seem difficult. Hang in there! If you stick to it, you'll develop good habits that will serve you throughout your university education.

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