

## Focusing Your Attention

Are you easily distracted?

Can you direct your attention to school tasks?

Do you know when you need a change in your study environment?

Do you have the ability to pay attention (studying and listening) to academic tasks?

**If you are having trouble concentrating your problem may be one or some or all of the following:**

**You haven't organized a plan for studying.** It's easier to concentrate on the task at hand when you have set aside specific times for your other tasks. If you're not organized, then you always seem to have too many things to do and you can't get going on any of them.

- **Develop a semester plan.** Write down all of the academic tasks you have to complete for the entire semester. Break them into their component smaller steps wherever possible.
- **Develop a weekly plan.** Every weekend, make a realistic plan for the upcoming week.
- **Develop a daily plan.** Every night, make a realistic plan for the next day. Don't make your plans too ambitious, or you will always be failing to get through your list. Success feels better than failure, so plan accordingly.
- **Set realistic goals.** Set up realistic goals for study. If you have hardly been studying at all, it is not realistic for you to announce suddenly: "Tonight I plan to study for six hours." The chances are that the required effort will be too much for you, and you'll only experience another discouraging failure. To succeed, the change in habits must be gradual. If you were to study for only two hours on that evening, you would have a far better chance of achieving your goal. Set study goals before you begin each period of study (number of pages, number of problems, etc.).
- **Use a reminder list.** To avoid worrying about the possibility of missing personal appointments, write them down on your daily 3x5 reminder card. If an appointment is several days away, write it on a desk calendar, academic planner or post-it notes. Having made a written reminder, you will no longer clutter your mind with these details. If necessary, make a calendar of events to clear your mind of distractions.

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**Your Comprehension of the Course Structure is Poor.** Your course material should hang together in a coherent pattern. If it seems like thousands of disjointed bits of information, then it will be far more difficult to remember, and you'll have a harder time concentrating.

- **Identify the main ideas for the course.** Take your course outline and make a conceptual "map" of the main units in the entire course.
- **Identify the main ideas for each chapter.** For each chapter or unit covered, make a smaller map of the topics it contains.
- **Keep track of where you have been and where you are going in the class.** As you follow the course, keep track of where you are on the map, and anticipate what you will be studying and what you need to complete. When you see the pattern of the course, your comprehension and concentration will improve.
- **Use academic resources available to you.** If you're struggling with understanding the material seek out the resources available to you at Ferris State University. Ask questions in class. Visit your instructor's office hours. Form study groups with other students. Use the Academic Support Center (ASC 1017 x. 3543).

**You're Procrastinating:** So you get organized and you set up a schedule, but you keep avoiding your work and finding other things to do. Now what?

- **Re-visit your motivations.** Remember, the current task is related to the course, which is related to the program which you chose, which is related to larger issues of what you want in life. You don't have to have everything figured out, but remembering the big picture can help you get going. "I want to do this" is a much healthier attitude than "I should (or have to) do this".
- **Develop a sense of progress.** Break your study task down into bite-sized chunks. Each time you sit down to work, set an objective for that study session, enjoy the accomplishment of getting it done, and do something fun to reward yourself for making progress.
- **Don't get drawn into perfectionism or fear of failure.** Just emphasize what you know, what you want to know, and what you want to express. Do your best, but don't waste energy on impossible ideals
- **Don't get too isolated in your studies.** Talk about the material with instructors, friends, and other students.
- **Break-up the content of your study.** Mix up subjects and build in variety and interest to remove boredom. Start with your hardest subject first, that way you're still fresh when you start to study the material.
- **Build up to longer study periods.** Start with short study periods and build to longer periods only as fast as you maintain concentration.

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- **Plan out your study time.** The length of your study period should be determined by the amount of material you have decided to cover, rather than by the clock (Often the clock is one of the most serious distracters.)  
**You're neglecting yourself:** Remember, the mind and the body are not two separate things. To improve your concentration, get to know what you need in order to operate at full steam.
- **Eat well!** It's harder to concentrate when you're operating on caffeine, nicotine, and junk food. Eat well to be able to concentrate and learn better.
- **Don't fight hunger!** Hunger is such a basic and persistent state that there is no sense trying to overcome it. Give in! Feed yourself; then get back to work.
- **Get Enough Sleep.** It's said that most people in our society are sleep-deprived to some extent. If this includes you, then your concentration is worse than it could be.
- **Pick the right time of day.** People have differing patterns of high and low energy throughout the day. Know your own patterns and plan your work accordingly though often it is best to study during the day and early evening; you'll remember better. It is also best to study when there are the fewest competing activities in progress. Finally it is best to study when adequate rest periods are provided and to stop studying when fatigue or lack of attention occurs.
- **Exercise Daily.** A good workout sharpens the mind. If you skip out on exercise because of time constraints, your concentration will probably suffer.
- **Watch the drugs you take.** Whether prescription, over-the-counter, recreational, or just your morning caffeine, drugs affect your concentration. If you're thinking more about your next "fix" you're not able to concentrate. Pay attention and understand what effects they have on you.
- **Reward Yourself.** Design adequate rewards after specified goals are attained. Be sure to plan time for stress management and for play. Knowing you have something to look forward to often will often help you to concentrate better. Just make sure your planned reward time doesn't exceed your planned academic time.

**You Haven't Created a Study Environment:** Find a place to study and keep it for study only. Tool-up the environment with all study needs. Control noise level and the visual environment to acceptable levels. Avoid relaxing while working; create a work atmosphere.

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- **Be prepared to study.** Before sitting down make sure you have everything: sharp pencils, fresh paper, note cards, necessary books and notes. Then stay in your chair until you have studied for the time you have set for your first break. In that way, you'll remain in the driver's seat –that is, in control.
- **Seek privacy.** Find ways to eliminate unwanted interruptions. Your job while at school is to study and become educated. Interruptions may become an obstacle which prevents your ability to do so. Find somewhere or develop "do not disturb" rules so you can get the job done.
- **Check your air quality.** Stuffy rooms make it difficult to concentrate. Be sure to get some fresh air. Make sure smells are ventilated out of your room. Turn on a fan to help clear the air and for some white noise to help mask environmental noises.
- **Control the temperature** – Set the temperature so it's just right for you, too warm and you'll feel sleepy, too cold and you're focused on how uncomfortable you are feeling.
- **Activate your body to improve concentration.** Watch your posture and support. Avoid sleep-inducing positions. If you get too relaxed and comfortable it is often hard to stay awake and focus.
- **Clutterproof Your Life** - Get everything off your desk except the work you're doing
- **Ignore "chaos" around you.** There will always be some noise around us. Avoid disturbances if you can, but do your best to ignore the noise you can't avoid. Don't let yourself become annoyed. The internal irritation you create has a more devastating effect on concentration than the external noises annoying you.

**Your mind just keeps wandering:** Think of concentration as presence of mind. When your mind is jumping from one topic to another, it's typically a case of ideas and images from the past and the future impinging on the present. When these distracting extra thoughts come to you can follow them, but this may lead to aimless mental wandering. You can try to shut them out, but they'll probably just keep nagging you. Your best strategy may be to relax and let them fall away by themselves.

- **Breathe.** Ground yourself and achieve presence of mind by paying attention to your breathing. Regular, deep breathing helps to re-unite your mind and your body, and brings you back to the present.
- **Develop a Positive Attitude.** Look upon studying as an opportunity to learn, rather than as an unpleasant task to complete. Also, since you may be spending a great deal of time in your room, don't make it a prison; instead create a sanctuary. You'll be more likely to look forward to learning if you like the place where you'll be studying.

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- **Confine your shifts in attention.** It's natural for your attention to shift frequently. There will be shifts in attention, but try to confine these shifts to the subject matter at hand. If you can't study because your mind is clogged keep a pad of paper handy to jot down extraneous thoughts that cross your mind, get them out of your mind and onto paper and deal with them when you get done.
- **Use the Checkmark technique.** Have a sheet of paper handy by your book; then, when you catch yourself not concentrating, put a checkmark on the sheet. The mere act of doing this will remind you to get back to work. Students report that when they first tried this system, they accumulated as many as twenty checkmarks per textbook page; after one or two weeks, they were down to one or two checkmarks per page.
- **Stay here now - don't daydream.** Daydreaming is a way of escaping from hard work. Pleasant as it is, it can use up precious time in which you could be working toward your goals. It is far better to establish the positive habit of plunging directly and efficiently into your work. This is a habit which will stand you in good stead all of your life.
- **Allow Worry Time.** If you're a worrier give yourself a limited amount of time each day to worry – say a half an hour. During that time period all you can do is worry. Worry to your heart's content. Then when that time is over you don't get to worry until your next worry time – the next day. If a worrisome thought comes your way – tell yourself, "I'm not worrying about that right now, I can worry about it tomorrow". Of course if personal worries and anxieties are overwhelming you then maybe a trip to the Counseling Center (2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Birkam, 591-5968) would be a good idea so you can talk things through with someone else. If academic and educational worries are what are overwhelming you, then stop by the Educational and Career Counseling Center (Starr 313, 591-3057) to get back on track.
- **Don't rely on will power.** Will power alone can't make you concentrate. You'll be breaking concentration whenever you remind yourself, "I must use will power to concentrate." When distracters are present, become intensely involved in what you are doing.
- **Realize** that you won't lose friends, respect, or a "good time" just because you're studying...these will keep and you'll be one step closer to achieving your goal.

**Choose the techniques that suit you the best, and be aware of how the ability to focus and achieve presence of mind in daily activities is transferable to your academic pursuits.**