Staying focused while studying
What is this guide about?

When studying at university you will need to be able stay focused and concentrate on particular tasks. This applies whether you are reading for essays, revising for exams or grappling with a problem sheet. Developing your ability to concentrate is, therefore, key to success in your studies. You will need to become single-minded and able to focus your full attention on one topic or task while shutting out all other thoughts and distractions.

Easier said than done! Mental and physical distractions are barriers to concentration. Tiredness, anxiety, poor working environments are among the things that may stop you from settling down to a task or cause you to lose focus.

Do any of these feel familiar?

- My mind keeps wandering
- It is too noisy to work here
- I’m really worried about something and it keeps popping into my mind
- My relationship is in trouble and it is the only thing I can think about
- I have so many things to do – I can’t focus on just one thing
So how do you overcome these problems and concentrate more effectively?

In this guide, we aim to help you:

- understand the things that stop you from focusing on your current task
- use your time more effectively
- overcome distractions by developing good study habits

Introduction

Your ability to concentrate will vary depending on how interested you are in the topic or task and how long you have been working on it. Some topics will absorb you completely and you will not notice time passing, with other tasks time may seem to drag. Developing your concentration skills will help, particularly with focusing on less interesting tasks, and here are some ways you can do this.

- Know yourself – when do you work best and where, what helps and what distracts you?

- Plan, plan, plan – think about the topic you need to study, why you are studying it and how much time you need to put in – good time management really helps here.

- Develop strategies – there are many ways to improve your learning, some will suit you better than others will. This guide outlines some of them so have a look and take your pick.

- Be kind to yourself – take care of your mental and physical health and set realistic goals.
Barriers to concentration - what makes it difficult for you to focus on a task?

A range of factors may be affecting your ability to concentrate and recognising what they are is the first step to dealing with them. We are all different and some things that bother one person may not affect another. Something that disturbs your concentration on one task may have no impact on a different one. Here are things you may experience – some to do with your environment (external) and others relate to you personally (internal).

**External**
- Too much noise (or too quiet, it depends on you)
- Interruptions
- Poor working environment – wrong temperature, poor light etc.
- Social media
- Feeling tired or unwell

**Internal**
- You are feeling anxious/stressed
- You are depressed
- Personal problems
- Family and relationship worries
- Money worries
- Loss of interest
How to overcome these barriers

Look after your mental health

- If you are feeling depressed or anxious it is important to get help, or your problems with studying may make things worse - there is lots of support in the University from: your Personal Tutor, Enabling Services, Student Life, the Faith and Reflection Centre, and more. Find details on our Support Services page.

- For more minor worries mindfulness may help, or chatting things through with a friend or family member – you will be able to focus better with a calm mind. Find an App to help – Headspace and Calm are two but there are plenty out there.

Take care of your physical health

- Eat well, sleep soundly, take exercise! The better you feel, the easier it will be to be disciplined and single minded

- If you are tired or unwell, have a rest and see the doctor if necessary – sometimes a short break or a good night’s sleep will sort the problem.
Avoid distractions

- If possible, find a workspace that suits the task in hand.
- If you can’t change your environment try these:
  - Use earplugs or listen to music on headphones to cut out noise.
  - Put a ‘Do not disturb’ notice on your door – and mean it.
  - Switch to something which does not need the same level of concentration.

There are Apps available to help you to manage distractions. Forest rewards you for not reacting to distraction from your phone for set periods of time by growing virtual trees – the more you concentrate the bigger your forest grows.

Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan this:</th>
<th>Think about this:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ![Couch](image) Where | • Where you concentrate best  
  • If away from home can you get back safely  
  • Is it a studious and comfortable environment |
| ![Question Mark](image) What | • What is your focus for this particular study session  
  • Why have you chosen to do this now – is it high priority or a distraction from a more difficult task  
  • What are you expecting to achieve in this session |
| ![Clock](image) When | • At what time of day you work best  
  • Schedule difficult tasks for when you feel freshest and easier ones when you are more easily distracted |
| ![Hourglass](image) How long | • How long you will spend in total  
  • How many breaks you will take and how often  
  • How long you can focus on this task |
Stockpile nutritious snacks to feed your brain and body – being hungry can be very distracting

Know when to stop – be smart about what to do when you can no longer ignore distractions

The process – creating good study habits

- Make a plan
- Warm up your brain
- Set a clear target
- Know how long you can concentrate
- Begin your study session
- Stop when you begin to feel tired and lose focus

Warm up exercises: Count backwards/think of objects beginning with each letter of the alphabet/skip numbers while counting/download an app such as Peak-Brain Train; there are plenty out there.

If you lose focus: Don’t force it – any more work you do is likely to be unproductive. Instead, follow these steps:

- Review what you have achieved
- Set some new targets for your next session – small ones are good
- Decide when you will come back to the topic
- Congratulate yourself for what you managed to do
Mix it up – vary the tasks or topics you plan to tackle so you stay engaged.

Common mistakes and how to avoid them

Leaving things to the last minute

➢ Improve your time management by finding the tools and strategies which work for you – there are plenty of ideas in our guide ‘Managing your Time’.

Trying to do too many things at once

➢ Avoid breaking up your study periods with non-urgent tasks – instead, keep a notepad beside you and when something you need to do pops into your head, just jot it down to action later. There are plenty of Apps you could use too.

Not prioritising effectively

➢ Develop a routine – treat studying like a job, with set hours. This will help you build your self-discipline and avoid procrastination.

Not addressing issues that may distract you

➢ Pace yourself and build plenty of breaks into your study routine.
➢ Look after yourself – choose a comfortable place to work and plan some rewards to keep you motivated.
➢ Use the Checkmark technique. Have a sheet of paper handy. When you catch yourself losing focus, put a checkmark on the sheet - this will remind you to get back to work. The number of checkmarks you make should reduce over time.
Consider installing a website blocker if you are frequently distracted by visiting sites not relevant to the work you are doing. There are plenty available both for mobile and desktop devices.

Summary

You may not always find it easy to concentrate but building good study habits and routines will help. Looking after yourself physically and mentally are both important, as is knowing when to stop studying for a while and take a break.

Look at the following checklist to see if you have given yourself the best possible chance of success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Complete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have planned my work for the day/week, setting clear, achievable goals.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have planned breaks and rewards to keep me focused and improve motivation.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have selected a study environment which is suitable for the work I want to do.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have allocated time for other tasks which might otherwise distract me.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am dealing with worries or anxieties so I have a clear head for studying.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have all the materials I need for this study session, including snacks and drinks to keep me going.</td>
<td>✔️</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>