

Concentration

Like riding a bike, learning a language or practising the piano, concentration can be learnt and improved.

Do it step by step

- If you were to start a physical exercise routine, you would start with small amounts of exercise at one time. Similarly, when you start to develop skills to concentrate, start with short periods – maybe 10 minutes. The most important thing is to set a time and stick to it. If your mind wanders off (to the shopping list, or next week's touch football game) bring it back to the task. Do this gently – you don't need to criticise your mind or be irritated.
- When the allotted time is over give yourself a rest by standing up and stretching or getting a glass of water. When you are changing topics or have done a section of work, take a significant break like a short walk.
- Vary the tasks you do over a morning or afternoon. A change from one activity to another will help you stay focussed.
- Concentration is reduced by distraction. It could be important to develop some assertiveness skills to stand up for your right to study, your right to take time for study. This may be particularly true if your family or friends are not students. You may have to work out ways to be "unavailable" to others.

Your ability to concentrate on your study will gradually increase as your skills improve.

Be strategic

- Read actively – interact with the text instead of being passive. Write yourself questions; take notes about how this links with other things you've read or what you don't agree with. Imagine essay or exam questions.
- Remind yourself of your goals from time to time – both the immediate goal (finishing this assignment) and the longer term goal (getting your degree).
- Think about ways you have stayed focussed on a subject or activity in the past. What worked for you then? Is there something you learnt that you could translate to your study situation?

Blocks to concentration

If you find concentration difficult you may have other things getting in the way – some common things that get in the way are:

- Adjusting to university – the change of routine and different expectations of school or work can make concentration difficult. Use the recommended reading guide for your area of study - talk with your tutor, lecturer or go to Academic Skills and Learning.
- Being sick – see a doctor
- Feeling down/anxious/unmotivated/depressed – talk to a counsellor and/or see a doctor.
- Feeling bored – think about why you are doing your study. Is your study a means to an important end for the big picture you have of your life? Should you consider a change of subject? Speak with the Sub-Dean or visit Careers.

- Feeling tired – think about your general health – do you get enough sleep (8 or more hours), do you eat enough fresh fruit and vegetables, are you consuming too many caffeine drinks or high sugar foods/drinks, are you getting some exercise? Your general health will have an impact on your ability to focus on your study. You may need to see a doctor if you continue to be tired.

Find the Right Time and Place

- Know what you need to do and when. Make a plan of what is due and when it's due on a wall planner or something that gives you a clear visual impression of what is due and when.
- Discover the times when you are more attentive - in the mornings or afternoons or evenings. Use this time to do more complex pieces of study. If you know you have a 'down time' (i.e. less attentive) use that time to do less complex tasks such as organising your work or looking for texts in the library.
- Have a designated place to study. Keep that place for study. Set up your study place so that it is right for you - music? Good lighting? Alone or with someone else? You will find you concentrate best if you are in a positive frame of mind. Certain types of music are more likely to help you achieve a positive mind frame than other types of music – what works for you?
- If you are working on your computer, leave computer games, email etc. for the end of your study time rather than as an option for a 'short break' – they can take over your time!
- Don't try to study on your bed (you'll find you doze off when you're wanting to study and stay awake when you want to sleep).
- Start your study time with a ritual. The ritual could be getting yourself a cup of tea or clearing the desk ready to start or putting on your music. It might be organising your notes or reading through the last lecture – something that is regular and begins to get your mind into the right place. This is a bit like starting your exercise routine with stretches.

Say NO to multitasking

Multitasking can dramatically cut down on productivity and makes it harder to hone in on details that are important to learn. Attentional resources are limited so it is important to budget them wisely.

Think of your attention as a spotlight. If you shine that spotlight on one particular area, you can see things very clearly. If you were to try to spread that same amount of light across a large dark room, you might instead only glimpse the shadowy outlines. So stop multitasking and give your full attention to one thing at a time.

Mindfulness

Consider engaging in daily guided mindfulness to help you improve your concentration and focus. Research has shown that daily engagement in mindfulness assists in staying on tasks longer, switching between tasks less frequently, and studying more efficiently.

There are many free mobile mindfulness apps that you can listen to. Alternatively you can listen to the *mindfulness talking tips* on the ANU Counselling site Introduction to Mindfulness Course

<https://www.anu.edu.au/students/health-safety-wellbeing/counselling/anu-counselling/introduction-to-mindfulness-course>.