

- **Sit Down to Study the Proposed Subject at the Proposed Time and for the Proposed Duration**

If your mind wanders, repeat your goal and continue to focus on what you agreed and not on past performance, not on your faults, but what you are doing now, studying. After the study period, close your books, tidy up the study area, and leave. Alternate rewarding activities with those you like less. Adjust the study schedule as your study needs change and your concentration skills improve.

Remember!

Active concentration, the kind involved in intellectual work, is a learned skill. Be patient with yourself.

Initially you may be able to concentrate for short periods only. Later on you can do it longer. You'll get more mental muscle as you practice.

Another thing, expect to succeed. Tell yourself you will succeed if you try — it's more likely to happen that way.



Counseling Center
Consultation and Psychological Services

Division of Student Affairs

University of Kentucky
201 Frazee Hall, Lexington, KY 40506-0031
(859) 257-8701
www.uky.edu/StudentAffairs/Counseling

An Equal Opportunity University.

The images used in this publication are not of actual University of Kentucky students. Information gathered and compiled by Sandra K. Lybarger, Ph.D. 2007, and updated 2010.

improving **Concentration**



Counseling Center

Concentration is the ability to keep your mind focused on one thing and bring it back whenever it wanders. Athletes learn to concentrate on their own performance, not on their competition; creative artists learn to work without always being inspired; and, students can learn to concentrate on their studies. Some academic projects may not be fun in the short term, but contribute to the long term goal of a college degree.

There are **two kinds of concentration**.

When you are drawn into a book or movie by something very interesting or appealing, that's "**passive concentration**" — it's not difficult to maintain even if you are interrupted occasionally. The other kind, "**active concentration**," is usually involved in intellectual work, focusing on reports you must write or on assignments you must read when they're not intrinsically interesting to you. This is the essence of academic success.

If you've despaired at your mental wanderings during study, don't give up hope. There is no known difference in brain chemistry or IQ between people who actively concentrate well and those whose minds meander at the first interruption. Researchers have found, however, that you can strengthen powers of concentration with practice, much like developing "mental muscle."

Let's look at some roadblocks to concentration that college students often experience. Did you ever flop down on the bed to study, listen to the stereo, drink

soda, eat chips, talk on the phone, run downstairs now and then to check on your laundry and then say to friends the next day, "I studied last night." Such a richness of multiple activities frequently dilutes the study experience as each activity distracts from the other with full awareness of nothing. For many people, studying like this is a habit.

Another factor is negative self talk. Saying, "I'm never going to get done," or "I'm going to fail this test for sure," may add enough anxiety to substantially interfere with concentration. Better to say, "I can do this if I try," — even if you don't quite believe it at first.

Other factors like drinking coffee can give you jitters or too little sleep can make you too tired to concentrate well.

If you want to learn active concentration, you may have to break some old study patterns that keep you from concentrating.

Here is an Active Concentration Exercise that may help you:

- **Set Your Study Goal**

Make it specific. Identify the behaviors you want to see in yourself as well as the outcome in writing. For example, write, "I want to concentrate on math for 30 minutes a day so that I can improve my math grade this semester," or "I want to concentrate on writing my literature paper 30 minutes a day so that I'll be

finished by the December deadline."

- **Identify What You Do Instead of Concentrating**

How do you perpetuate old habits and mess yourself up? How does this cause problems? What are the benefits of changing? Again, address this in writing.

- **Make a Realistic Plan for Yourself**

Daily or weekly. Something to take you from here to there. Athletes know that they can't do all their training the day before the meet. Mental muscle builds best, too, if you space the practice times. List specific activities you need to do for a project and put times on them.

Example: Research Paper
Library Research - 4 hours
Rough Draft - 3 hours
Typing Final Draft - 2 hours

Decide what you are going to do and when. Separate and simplify. You can only do one thing well at a time. Plan to actively concentrate for short periods of time and plan rest breaks as well.

- **Choose a Place to Study**

Not on your bed, not in the tub, not in the laundry room, preferably in a place where you will only study so you will associate that place with studying. A new place in the library or at a clean desk in your room. Have all supplies ready. Close the door. Ask others not to bother you.