



DOUGLAS COLLEGE

Learning Centre

IMPROVING CONCENTRATION

You can make the best use of your study time—and actually spend less time studying—if you are able to stay focused. Poor concentration can mean it takes longer to learn material and longer to get assignments done. Fortunately, it is possible to improve your ability to concentrate.

The first step is to *know yourself*. No two people are exactly the same, so you need to analyze your personal concentration patterns. Start paying attention to how you study, so you know what works and what doesn't work for you. What helps you concentrate? What makes it hard to stay focused? Once you have a better idea of the answers to these questions, you are on your way to improving your concentration powers.

The following list was made by experienced students. These are things that help *them* concentrate. Feel free to change any of the ideas and add your own. Then, choose the ones that you think could have the greatest positive impact on *your* concentration and try them out.

Keep track of your studying and concentration so that you can evaluate the strategies. Usually it takes awhile for better concentration to develop, so don't give up on a strategy until you've given it some time to prove itself.

Create Your Best Study Environment

- Limit the distractions in your environment. Find or create a quiet place, free from distractions and interruptions. Recognize what distracts you the most and eliminate those things. If you use the computer to study, do you find yourself on Facebook, doing email, googling, playing video games? If so, try studying away from the computer or turn off the computer.
- Use the same location each time you study. If possible, make it a place that you use only for studying. If your mind starts to wander, and you need a break, go somewhere else. (Or, try the opposite. Find a new place

to study. Maybe an unfamiliar place would keep you from thinking of other things to do.)

- If you study with music, choose music that does not distract you. Many students study to a background of classical music.
- Make sure you have the materials you need (texts, paper, etc.) before you start.
- Don't get too comfortable. Study in a chair at a desk or table, not propped up on your bed.
- Let anyone who might distract you (family, friends, roommates) know that you need uninterrupted time.

Make Time Work for You

- Start soon after you get your assignment, so you won't be caught up and distracted by anxiety.
- Overview your task before you start. Plan how you will tackle it.
- Break your work into steps, so it will be less overwhelming. Steps will also help you make use of shorter blocks of time.
- Know the hours when you are at your peak wakefulness—are you a day person or a night person?—and use that for study time.
- Try to study at regular times.
- When you take a break, set how long it will be. Then return to studying when the time is up. Making your snacks ahead of time means you don't waste time getting them on your breaks.
- Don't try to study for long stretches without breaks.
- Set a timer and study until it goes off. Then set it again, so you will know when your break is over.

Motivate Yourself

- Set up rewards: "I'll finish taking notes on this chapter, and then I'll... [call a friend, go for a walk, catch up on Facebook, etc.]
- Remind yourself about your overall goal for taking the course.
- Set short-term goals so you can "see the light at the end of the tunnel."
- Make a list of what you need to do. Cross things off as you accomplish them. Reread the list if you need help to stay with your task.
- Make up questions to answer about your study material. Finding the answers will help you focus.

- Use positive “self-talk” to help you stay focused. Say encouraging things to yourself.

And When Your Mind Wanders...

- Don't worry or get frustrated if your mind wanders. It's normal. It's also normal to concentrate for longer periods with more practice, so don't give up.
- Take short breaks when you start to lose focus. Shake, walk, let it out!
- Notice when you are distracted. Go over that material again right away.
- Make a star on your work where you lost concentration. Review those sections again later.
- Switch to another subject or another assignment.
- Write a list of all the things you have to do—school and non-school tasks. Then you'll know you won't forget about them, but you can let them go at the moment.

General Tips

- Take care of your health: eat well; sleep enough; exercise frequently; breathe deeply.
- Alternate the subjects you are studying so you stay fresher.
- Take time to summarize your material and reflect on what you have learned.

Check on yourself to make sure you are learning the material and/or making progress on your assignment. You could ask yourself questions, or summarize what you've read, or refer to your list of steps to see how far you've come.



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STEPS FOR TEXTBOOK READING

This handout describes steps for reading your textbook in preparation for tests. Other purposes for reading, such as reading for participation in discussion or reading for doing research for a paper, are not included here.

The question of how to read a textbook may seem pretty straight forward – you just open your book and read. However, there are strategies you can use that will help you get better results from your reading and save you time too. This is not speed reading; instead it is strategic reading. This handout describes steps that students have found to increase learning and save time.

One Douglas College student reported that after getting only 60% on her first midterm, she used this process, and she increased her grade on her second midterm to 90%. Not only did she make that huge improvement, but she also spent only half the time on her reading that she had earlier in the semester! This may not be typical, but it is possible.

The best way to use this handout is to apply it step-by-step to a reading assignment you need to do. So, get out a course textbook and get ready to use it. Your first time through this process may take a little longer than it normally would, so don't give up on that score. Once you get used to it, it will definitely save you time.

Here are the steps for reading a chapter or section of a textbook:

1. Think about Purpose
2. Pre-read
3. Section
4. Read Actively
5. Produce Study Material
6. Study the Material You've Produced

On the following pages, each step in the process is described. Tasks are provided to help you practice the steps one at a time with a tutor or on your own. Practice will help you understand and evaluate the usefulness of each step.

1. Think about Your Purpose for Reading

Briefly consider what you need to get out of your reading. What kind of tests or exams will you need to write?

- Will they be multiple choice? If so, you will need a fairly detailed ability to recognize the information on the test. You will not need to be able to recall the information on your own.
- Will they be essay tests? If so, you will primarily need to recall main ideas. You will probably not need very specific details. The big picture will be more important.
- Will they be application tests? This is a test where you have to apply knowledge more than just repeat back what you've learned. Application tests include most tests in Math as well as tests with case studies such as you get in Business or Nursing. For such tests, you not only need a full understanding of the information but you also need practice in applying what you know.
- Will the tests be a mixture of the above?

If you don't know anything about the tests you'll write in the course, it's worthwhile to do some detective work. If you've already written a test for the instructor, that can give you valuable information about the kinds of questions asked and the test format the instructor is likely to use. You can also ask the instructor about the format of upcoming tests. Although most instructors will not tell you the exact questions on the test, they will often give you information about the types of questions and the general topics that will be included. Some instructors also make old tests available at the Reserve Desk at the Library. Students who have taken the course before can also be valuable resources. The more detective work you can do about the tests you will have to write, the more efficient you can make your reading.

By thinking about your purpose in doing the reading, you can narrow down the focus of your reading and thereby limit what you spend time on.

Task: Consider your purpose in reading the textbook you've chosen to use for this activity. What kinds of tests will you need to write? How should that affect what you need to get out of your text? If you don't know anything about the tests, plan a strategy for finding out.

2. Pre-read

Now spend about 5 minutes looking over the chapter. As you look at the items below, consider:

- What you already know about the topics being discussed. This provides hooks for your memory. It is by connecting new ideas to old ones that you can remember the new information. Your prior knowledge might be academic or it might be from life experience.
- The organization of the material; get a sense of how the reading will progress. Knowing where you are going in reading helps you organize the information in your head. This organization aids understanding and memory.
- Your purpose in reading the text.

Here are the things you should look at in your chapter. Not all of the things on the list are in every chapter, but if they're there, take a quick look at them.

- a. Read the title of the chapter.
- b. Read the introduction. Just read the first part of it if it is long.
- c. Read the chapter objectives (either in the text or in your course pack).
- d. Read the chapter headings and sub-headings.
- e. Examine any diagrams, graphs, pictures, etc.
- f. Scan any marginal notes or boldface terms.
- g. Read the chapter summary or review of main points.
- h. Read the list of key terms.
- i. Read the chapter review questions.

Task: Open your text to the next chapter you need to read for your course. Now, look at all the items from the previous list which are included in the chapter. As you look:

- *consider what you already know about the topics presented*
- *notice the organization of the chapter*
- *think about what kind of test you'll need to write on the chapter*

With your tutor, discuss what you have learned about about the chapter.

3. Section

Now divide the chapter into several manageable sections using the headings and sub-headings to guide you. Sections can vary in length, but the best is probably if the sections are about 2 to 3 pages long. Go on to steps 4 and 5 with the first section. Then move on to the following sections in the same way.

Task: Look over the first part of the chapter and identify the first couple of sections you will work on.

4. Read Actively

a) Create questions.

- Look at the headings, sub-headings, marginal notes and bold face items, and think of questions that you think will be answered in the section. For example, if a sub-heading in a Marketing text under the major heading of *Persuasion* is *Testimonials*, a student might make questions like *What is a testimonial? How does a testimonial persuade?*
- Consider the chapter objectives and/or review questions you pre-read. Do these suggest other questions about this section? Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. Write your questions down on the left hand side.

b) Read the section, looking for answers to the questions you identified.

- Don't get bogged down trying to understand every single thing; just focus on answering your questions. Skim stuff that does not relate to your questions.
- Use a highlighter or pencil to mark the answers to your questions or make notes on the right hand side of the paper you wrote the questions on.
- Monitor yourself for losing focus as you read. If you notice your mind has drifted away from the reading, make a mark on the top corner of your book, and get back to the reading. Using this strategy, you will find that the number of marks reduces over time.
- Take regular short breaks. Don't try to do a marathon reading session; that's not very productive. A five minute break every half hour is a good rule of thumb.
- Read sitting at a desk or table. It is much harder to focus if you are lying down or in a soft chair.

Task: Start with the first section in your chapter. Create questions and record them on a piece of paper. Then read the section looking for answers to your questions; either highlight the answers or take notes on the answers in your own words. See the next section (Produce Study Material) for more details on highlighting and taking notes.

5. Produce Study Material

If you've followed steps 1 to 4, you have already begun to produce study material. There are a number of types of study material that you can create; you need to consider which types suit your own style of learning as well as which are going to work best for the type of material you are trying to learn. Here are some options:

a. Highlight text and use marginal notes.

Highlight answers to your questions. Put notes in the margins beside the highlighted bits. These notes should be questions or

words that suggest a question. For example, if some highlighted bits suggest reasons for animal extinction, you might write *3 reasons for animal extinction* in the margin. If the term *metamorphosis* is defined, you might write *Define metamorphosis* or *What is metamorphosis?*

b. Take notes on the section.

This is similar to highlighting and using marginal notes, but it is done on separate paper and in your own words. This may seem more time consuming, but by putting the ideas in your own words, you make the ideas a lot more memorable. Some students worry that if they put the ideas in their own words, they might get it wrong, but test questions rarely use exactly the same words as the text anyway, so you need to form an understanding of the ideas, not just memorize something you don't understand. If you are worried that your notes are not accurate, you can check them with your instructor, a classmate, or a tutor.

A good way to make notes is to use a split-page system. In the split-page system, you draw a line down the middle of your page. On the left, you record questions (like the marginal notes described above). On the right, note the answers in your own words. This creates a good study tool for later.

c. Produce graphic organizers.

Graphic organizers are strategies for presenting information in a visual form. They include things like charts, timelines, graphs, process diagrams, classification trees, diagrams and mind maps. Refer to other Learning Centre handouts for ideas on how you could make graphic organizers (F-11, F-12 @ NW). For some types of material, it may best to do a number of sections of the chapter before you try to create graphic organizers.

The important benefit of graphic organizers is that they look at the big picture and they encourage you to see the relationships between the pieces of information you need to learn. This aids memory. Graphic organizers are especially useful for people who are visual learners.

d. Produce brief written summaries.

Summaries are another way to look at the big picture. For each section that you read, write 1 to 3 sentences in your own words, summarizing the key ideas you discovered in the reading.

It is often good to produce a variety of study material. Many students find it best to (a) either do highlighting or notetaking **plus (b)** either make graphic organizers or summaries. Experiment and see what works for you.

Task: Produce at least two kinds of study material on the section you have read. If the chapter continues on the same basic topic, you may not want to produce graphic organizers until you have worked on more sections of the chapter. Continue on with your reading assignment, section by section, until you have completed it. Then produce any further study material you think would be useful. Get feedback from your tutor on the study material you have produced.

6. Study the Material You've Produced

How to study?

- highlighting or notes
Cover the information. Look at the marginal notes or questions and try to think of the answer. Then consult the highlighted text or your notes to check if you got the answer right. Answering the questions out loud helps you remember better than doing it silently.
- graphic organizers
Look at your graphic organizers regularly. Think of questions you could be asked about the information in the organizers and answer the questions out loud.
- summaries
Review your summaries by reading them out loud. Think of exam questions that could be asked in relation to the summaries and answer them.

When to study?

It is best to study material within 24 hours of when you produced it. This makes a big difference to how much you remember. After that, the more often you review, the better you'll remember the material. The best course of action would probably be to review all the material weekly. However, that may not be too practical in terms of the time you have available. Minimally, you should also review it a week after producing it and again prior to writing your exams.

For more information on memory strategies, ask a Learning Centre tutor for handouts on memory.

Task: Within a day of completing the reading assignment, review the study material you produced. Plan when you will review it again.

Conclusion

How you use this reading strategy will depend on your preferences. Now that you have tried out the steps, you may have some ideas about what works best for you. Modify the strategy to better suit you or the kind of material you are learning.

Here are some frequently asked questions (F.A.Q.'s) that address some concerns that students often have when learning to read strategically.

F.A.Q.'s

How can doing all this possibly save me time?

Because your reading is more focused, you get a lot more out of the time spent and you don't waste time on things that are unimportant.

What if my text doesn't have headings and sub-headings, objectives and things like that? How can I create questions?

If all else fails, try reading the first sentence of each paragraph or sub-section and focus your questions on that material.

What if I don't think of a question that is important? I might ignore important information.

When you read looking for answers to your questions, you skim the rest of the material. If you see something that looks important that your questions don't address, you can always add in a question to cover it.

By doing this, I don't learn all the material. How can I do well if I don't learn everything?

The fact is that it is impossible to learn everything in a college textbook. If you try to do that, you will be unsuccessful. An important part of the reading process is to sift out the things that are most important. You may not always get every single thing that is important, but you will remember what you do get. For most students, the chance of success is much greater with this approach than if they try to learn everything in the book.



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STRESS REDUCTION STRATEGIES

Stress Reduction Strategies @ Crunch Time

Being a student can be stressful, but there are always a few weeks in the semester that are especially crazy. Below are some suggestions of how you can cope with those short but really stressful periods.

A. Lifestyle

- Get enough sleep.
- Eat properly.
- Exercise regularly.
- Get some time to yourself when you are not studying.
- Don't resort to a lot of coffee, alcohol or drugs to either stay awake or unwind.

B. Figuring out how to get things done.

- Get organized.
 - Put all assignment due dates in a day planner.
 - Make a to-do list. The things on the to-do list should not be huge. For example, don't put your 15-page research paper on your to-do list. Instead, put pieces of the job you can accomplish in a few hours on the list. For example, you might put *find three sources* or *develop thesis statement* or *write introduction* on the list. Check off the completed tasks as they are completed. Check off the assignments in your day planner when you get them done.
 - Make a time management plan. When will you work on what?
 - Organize your stuff so you can find what you need when you need it.

- Prioritize. Sometimes you may not have time to do everything you would like.
 - Prioritize your school tasks. For example, you might not have time to re-read Chapter 4; you might just have to skim it or go with your class notes or read the summary. Prioritize course work. Are you doing really well in one course and not so well in the others? Should you withdraw from the poor one? Should you put more time into the poor one? Are there courses you can coast in for a while without too much negative impact?
 - Prioritize aspects of your life. Consider how you can best balance family, friends, school and work to meet your own goals.
 - Prioritize social stuff. You might have to put off seeing that movie or visiting your grandma. The thing to remember is that you're not putting these things off for life, just for a few weeks. Explain to family and friends who might feel abandoned what's going on with you and why you're not available.
 - Prioritize your home responsibilities. Does it matter if you vacuum this week?

- Call in favours. Use your support network.
 - Does somebody owe you? Are there people willing to help you out? Maybe this is the time to get them to look after your child, pick up your laundry, give you feedback on a troublesome paper or give you a ride to school.



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LECTURE NOTE-TAKING

Taking good lecture notes is essential in many college level courses because your notes are a written record of lecture material that you will need to know for tests. Also, the physical act of note-taking helps you start to put information into your memory because it is an active way for your brain to start processing the information which produces more effective learning than just passively listening to the instructor.

This handout offers many suggestions of how to improve your note-taking skills; **select the tips that you would like to try out**, and remember that note-taking is a skill that can be improved through better technique and with practice.

Before Class: Preparing to take notes

There are several useful things you can do before class that will make the note-taking process easier. These pre-class preparation steps are especially important for classes that provide a great deal of challenging new content:

1. Look at your course-outline to see what the topic of the lecture will be and start anticipating what might be discussed in class.
2. Quickly read over your notes from the previous class to refresh your memory and get mentally warmed-up for the new material to come.
3. If your lecture is based on textbook material, read your assigned chapter **BEFORE** class. Notice the new concepts, and especially the new terminology that you will be discussing in class so that you can spell/write the new terms effectively while taking notes. If you do not have time to read the entire chapter or all the assigned pages, skim the text for an overview of the topics and core concepts, and to identify key terms. This preparation for the lecture will help you take much better notes.
4. Get to class early so that you can choose where to sit, and so you hear the crucial opening summary of today's lecture. Choose a place to sit that allows you to listen and pay attention rather than be distracted.

During the Lecture: Tips for taking notes in class

1. Do not depend only on the PowerPoint notes that the instructor provides for a lecture. Passively sitting and reading already written notes does not help you pay attention to the lecture or start to learn the material as effectively as when you take your own notes.
2. Always date your notes in case they get out of order, and so you can match your notes to the course outline the instructor handed out on the first day.
3. Write on the front side of your paper only. This keeps notes cleaner and easier to study from so you can spread them out in front of you.
4. Leave lots of spaces in your notes for integrating missed information when you edit your notes later. A good practice is to leave a left margin at least 5 cm. wide, and leave about 7 cm. at the bottom of the page which you can use later when you edit and study your notes (see the example notes at the end of this handout).
5. Listen for the main ideas and core concepts covered in a lecture and make sure you note these down as headings.

Teachers often give clues when they state main ideas or important points. Some of the more common clues are:

- a) Introductions and/or summaries given at the start or end of class, such as "Today we will cover . . ."
 - b) Material is written on the board
 - c) Repetition - the same idea is presented several times
 - d) Emphasis - this can be judged by a louder tone of voice, slowing down and emphasizing a point, stronger gestures, and/or the amount of time a teacher spends on the topic
 - e) Word signals; e.g., "It is important to note that..."
6. DO NOT try to write down everything that is said as you will get left behind.

Keep up by:

- using your own words to reduce and summarize information
- using abbreviations and symbols (see the list at the end of this handout.)
- writing phrases instead of full sentences

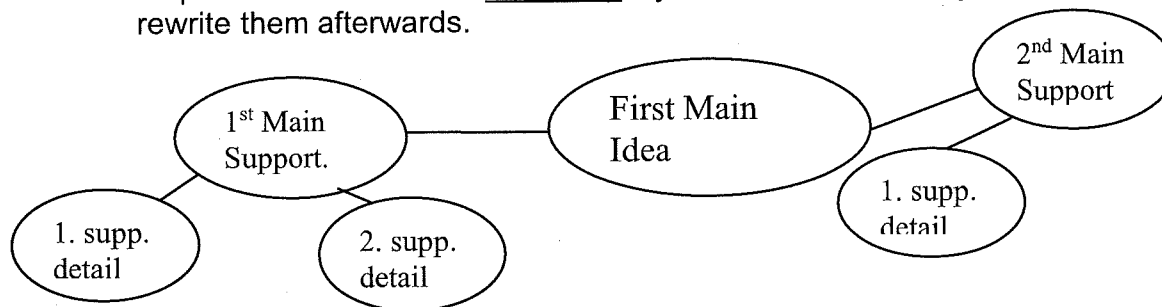
7. On the other hand, write down enough information so that you can understand your notes later. Some students make the mistake of not taking enough notes, and later they have trouble understanding them because they lack detail. The more complete your notes are, the easier they will be to study from later.

8. Leave gaps in your notes when moving from one idea or topic to the next. This makes it easier to see where one idea ends and another one starts, but it also gives space for making your notes more complete when you edit later.
9. When you miss information, leave a gap in your notes, catch up with the speaker, and fill in the missing information later by asking a friend, checking your textbook, or approaching the teacher.
10. Use a style of note-taking that will help you study later. Choose a style that leaves you space so that after the lecture you can add headings and key points and create review and study questions (see example at the end of this handout).
11. Adjust your note-taking to the type of lecture your instructor gives. If possible, take notes using the OUTLINE format. This involves a system of indenting information to show the relationship between main ideas, major supporting points and minor supporting details. This system is most useful when the lecture is presented in an organized fashion that moves from one point to the next.

Outline Format

- I. First Main Idea
 - A. First Main Supporting Point
 1. Supporting Detail
 2. Supporting Detail
 - B. Second Main Supporting Point
 1. Supporting Detail
- II. Second Main Idea

If your instructor moves from topic to topic and then back again, you may find it helpful to take notes in a mind-map style. However, this may mean you need to rewrite them afterwards.



12. Ask questions during class. This helps you stay alert and listen, and your notes will be clearer if you understand the lecture.

AFTER the lecture: Editing your notes

1. Take time to edit your notes soon after the class. Our brains forget quickly, so schedule time to edit your notes as soon as possible after the class. This will help you fill in gaps, identify where you still have questions, and have better notes to study from. Editing notes is not a waste of time because it is an effective form of studying. Each time you go over your notes, you help the information enter your long-term memory.

Some students recopy all their notes—to make them neater and as a way of studying. However, recopying everything is not always the best use of your time. It's often better to spend the time editing, noticing and highlighting main ideas and key points for emphasis, and rewriting only those points that need more clarification. This editing is a kind of studying because it helps you review, identify what is more important to remember, and consolidate your understanding of the material.

2. The best way to use your notes as a study aid is to view them at least 3 times before a test, once when you edit, once again at the end of a week when you review what you covered during the week, and a third time when you study for the test. This set of three, shorter reviews of your notes helps you learn more deeply and avoid having to cram the night before.
3. Use the left margin to anticipate and write possible exam questions (see the example notes at the end of this handout). Look at your notes and ask yourself "What question does this information answer?" When you have decided, write these questions next to the material in your notes. This way you create a question-answer system for studying.
4. Use the bottom section of your page to summarize the main concepts and most important details. You can do this when you edit your notes soon after the lecture. But you might find it works better to write the summary when you study before a test. Either way, the process of identifying and recording the main points will help you remember them, but it also helps you practice writing about the concepts, similar to responding to long answer questions on tests. It's simply good practice for the test.

Symbols for Note Taking

Every subject has its own terms and special language, so the symbols and abbreviations below are only a few examples. As well, it's important that you can recognize the abbreviations you use, so make a record the first time you use one, and try to use the ones you will remember easily.

Symbol	Meaning	Example
→	leads to, causes	smoking → lung cancer
↑	Increases, goes up	taxes ↑
∴	therefore	financial crisis ∴ stock fell
=	equal	inflation = higher prices
?	Note to ask instructor	
~	approximately	~ 2,000 people
&	and	crime & punishment
ψy	psychology	
%	percent	100 %
#	number	# 8
*	important	

Abbreviations for Note-taking

Abbreviation	Word
b/c	because
cf	compare
diff.	difference
e.g.	example
w/	with
w/o	without

Another way to shorten words is to leave out vowels from the middle of words.

Abbreviation	Word
bkgd	background
prblm	problem
estmt	estimate
amnt	amount
edn	education

Samples Notes

<p>What are arguments <u>for</u> GM foods?</p> <p>What are arguments <u>against</u> GM foods?</p> <p>How is GM food different from selective breeding?</p> <p>Define transgenic</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">month, day, year</p> <p><u>Genetically Modified Food</u></p> <p><u>Two views:</u></p> <p>1. Pro</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - credible scientists claim next step in animal husbandry - not much dif from selective breeding - regulatory bodies to ensure safety <p>2. Con</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - credible sci. say not proven safe - world not short of food; prblm is distribution - not being regulated → public not aware of GM foods in stores <p><u>Ecological Impact of GM Foods</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GM crops not like selective breeding - GM crops are "transgenic" - organisms contain DNA from other species e.g. - fish gene in strawberries to make cold resistant
<p>Summary: 2 views on whether GM foods are needed, safe, or different from past agricultural practices. GM foods "transgenic"—e.g. fish DNA in strawberries.</p>	