Concentration

Set Aside a Place for Study Only

This is the first step in improving your concentration. If possible set aside a particular place in your home to do your studying. Your study should become a habit when you are in your study space. This may seem a little wild at first, but consider your behaviour when you are in certain places. When you go to a football game, certain behaviour is almost automatic. You yell and cheer, even if your team is losing. When you go into a church or another place of worship, your behaviour patterns change to adapt to that place. If you plan properly and set aside a special area for study only, studying can also become a habit.

Many students spend most of their study time in their own rooms. It is important to know how to organize your room to obtain a good study area. Your study area should:

- Include a desk large enough to spread out on, a no-glare desk lamp and a straight chair.
- Be free from distractions, both audible and visible. Music playing should normally be instrumental only. Any other type of music will probably distract you.
- Be free of visual distractions that compete for your attention, such as a window with a view of a busy playground. The very least you should do is clear off your study space, so that you will have nothing to distract you from your studying.

Turn Away From Your Books When You Start to Daydream

When most people catch themselves daydreaming, they usually sit and stare at their books, telling themselves they've got to use more will power. More often than not, these people are just wasting a lot of time. What they are doing is associating their study areas with the little sermons that they preach to themselves. The association defeats the purpose of improving concentration.

One way to make sure that your books and study area do not become associated with daydreaming is:

- Stand up and look away from your books whenever you catch yourself with your head in the clouds.
- Stare at the opposite wall, look out the window, count the stripes on your bedspread, or do anything you want. Just don't look at your books.
This technique may seem preposterous to some. "I'll spend all my time counting stripes!" The only way to find out if it works is to try it. You will probably find that when you go to the trouble of ignoring your books, they will become the only thing you think about. **The reason for standing up is to break up the mental association of daydreaming, and to help you to focus on your studying.**

**Select a Symbol that is Related to Study**

Have you ever noticed that when you put on a dressy piece of clothing you feel a little formal and dignified? Or when you put on your comfy jeans that you feel casual and relaxed? The different articles of clothing affect how you feel and think. You can use this principle to help you improve your concentration habits.

- Choose a special article of clothing that you will wear when you are going to study.
- Take it off as soon as you've finished studying.
- Wear it only when you are in your study area, never at any other time. It can be a wild hat, a colorful scarf, or any other piece of clothing that is easy to put on and take off. After you have worn it for a while, you will feel like studying each time you put it on.

Another advantage to wearing a particular article of clothing when you study is that others will know that you are hitting the books and don't want to be disturbed. This helps to eliminate some of the social distractions that might get in the way of your study. Also, when people see that you have your study hat on, they will expect you to be studying. This puts a bit of social pressure on you, and those expectations will encourage you to concentrate on your studies.

**Set Aside a Certain Time to Begin Studying**

At certain times of the day you may find yourself doing certain things. This is more than just a habitual tendency to eat around noon. If you look carefully at your daily schedule, you may find that you do certain things at predictable times. You wake up at a predictable time, you arrive at school at a certain time and you get home at the same time each day. This schedule may vary according to your classes or your family, but in general, some of your behaviour is habitual and time-controlled.

If you can make your studying habitual (at the same time each day), it will be much easier to begin studying. If this behaviour takes place at a certain time each day, you will find it much easier to start studying without daydreaming or talking about other things.
Don't Start any Unfinished Business Just Before Studying
People tend to spend a lot of time thinking about jobs they haven't finished or obligations they have to fulfil. If you take this idea and apply it to the habit of daydreaming, you might suspect that much of the time you spend daydreaming is about uncompleted activities and obligations. Therefore, when your appointed study time is close at hand, don't get involved with things that could cause you to daydream, like long discussions or reading part of a new book. Thoughts of these things can break your concentration and interfere with your studies. Your ability to concentrate can be improved by being habitual with your study time, and by being careful of what you do before you start to study.

Set Small, Short-Range Sub Goals for Yourself
Have you ever ridden a horse and found that the closer the horse gets to the stable, the faster it runs? Or have you ever read a really good novel and found that the closer you get to the end of the book, the faster you read? These illustrations are what psychologists call a goal gradient. Simply, this means that the closer you get to your goal, the faster you move. Presumably, the faster you read, the better your concentration. This idea can be used to help you improve your concentration. Whenever you have a large reading assignment, divide it into subsections. Set a time when you predict you will have the first section done, the second section, etc. If you are working on math problems, set a time goal for the solution to each problem. You can divide any type of assignment into small units. Learn to set time goals for each unit. You will find this method a helpful one for increasing your ability to study without daydreaming.

Keep a Record of Your Goal Setting
Keeping a record of goals you have achieved will help you to use the goal-setting techniques more effectively. On a piece of paper, jot down what time you expect to finish a certain portion of your assignment. On your sheet you should have columns for the date, the starting time for each goal, your target time, your actual time, minutes per page and comments. This type of record keeping will allow you to evaluate your own study behaviour.

On the basis of your records, make your goals slightly more difficult. Don't try to force yourself to achieve impossible goals, but put a little pressure on yourself to read faster. Set the goals a little higher each time but don't make them too difficult. By using your past behaviour as a guideline, you can increase your concentration ability and your study efficiency.
Keep a Reminder Pad

Keeping a little pad or even a piece of paper beside you can help you increase your concentration. When you're studying, if you happen to think of something that needs to be done, write it down on your reminder pad. After you have written it down, you can go back to studying. When you look at the pad later, you'll be reminded of the things you have to do. This helps to reduce interference with your studying, because all the things you worry about forgetting will be right there on your reminder pad.

Relax Completely Before You Start to Study

One reason why some students find it hard to concentrate when they are studying is that bookwork and study scare them. When you are faced with an unpleasant task, or a task that you fear you may do badly, you may put it off as long as possible. If you were forced to work on such a task, you would welcome reasons to stop working on that task, or would even create some reasons to stop. You may escape from studying by "taking a quick break" or by daydreaming. If you react to studying in this way, you may be suffering from learned book-anxiety. This learning may take place in several ways. Here is one example of how it may occur:

Example: Book-Anxiety

Suppose that, in the past, you worked at studying, but not very effectively. Your study skills were not good, your test performance was poor, and the grades you earned were below what you wanted. With this type of background, just thinking about an exam is enough to make you feel uncomfortable. When you sit down to study, the first thing you think of is, of course, tests. And thinking about tests leads to discomfort which, in turn, leads to daydreaming.

Solution: Relax

Learn to relax. It is nearly impossible to feel any anxiety when you are in a state of complete physical relaxation. If you are completely relaxed, you should feel no anxiety about a book sitting on a desk. It is important for you to distinguish between a harmless book and the very real, damaging problems you'll have if you don't study.

The relaxation procedure focuses on associating books with relaxation, not with tension and anxiety. When you study, buckle down and really study; when you worry, pace around and really worry. Just don't do both at the same time.
Relaxation Procedure for Studying

Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room. For each muscle group mentioned below, tense or contract for the count of 10, then relax slowly for the count of 10. Notice the difference between the feeling of tension and relaxation for each muscle group. The transition from tension to relaxation should be a slow one, like air slowly leaking from a balloon.

1. Tense and then slowly relax your fists and forearms.
2. Bend your elbows and tense and then relax your biceps.
3. Straighten your arms and tense and then relax your triceps.
4. Wrinkle up and then relax your forehead.
5. Clench and then relax your jaw.
6. Shrug and then relax your shoulders.
7. Fill your lungs and then let air out slowly.
8. Pull in and then relax your stomach.
9. Push down your feet to tense your thighs and then relax them.
10. Tip up your toes to tense your shins and then relax them.
11. Raise your heels to tense your calves and then relax them.

The first time through, the whole procedure should take about 20 minutes. As time goes on, you will be able to perform the steps more quickly. Eventually, you should be able to completely relax almost at will.

After you have completed the procedure and are relaxed, think about getting ready to study. In your mind, see yourself walking to your studying area. See yourself coming nearer to the desk. See yourself opening your books and beginning to study with no discomfort or anxiety.