5.2: Concentration and Distraction

Dave Dillon

concentration. n. exclusive attention to one object.

– dictionary.com

Where To Study

In order to study successfully, students must learn to concentrate at a high level. It is important to know where we study best. Some students study well at home. Other students study well at a library or coffee shop. There is no best for all. Your best environment is based on you and your preferences.

Watch this selective attention test video and see if you come up with the correct answer.

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Counseling_and_Guidance/Book%3A_Blueprint_for_Success_in_College_and_Ca…
When To Study

It is also important to know when we study best. Many students are most efficient studying in the morning when they are fresh. Studying late in the day may be the only option for some students but often we are tired at the end of the day, and this can have a major effect on study efficiency. Figuring out where and when we study best may take some time. And even when we find the best place and time to study, we also have to be aware of distractions, which can be internal or external.

Internal Distractions

An internal distraction includes thought processes, self-esteem, or confidence. It’s something that interrupts you from what you’re doing. It might also be a computer or cell phone – something that is controlled by you. Many students intend to study but easily get distracted with surfing the Internet, checking social media, watching YouTube videos, or receiving a text message. If you don’t absolutely need your computer or cell phone for your study, it is my suggestion to not bring them or turn them off. If you do study with your phone or computer, it is best to have all potential alerts turned off. Notifications of text messages, emails, or social media updates all can serve as a major distraction to your studying.

External Distractions

External distractions might be your roommates, family or friends. Even if they are supportive of your study, it may be challenging to concentrate when they are around. Saying “no” is an important skill that may need to be utilized in order for you to have your study time without interruption.

Keep in mind that it may take 20 minutes to reach a high level of concentration. When we are interrupted, it takes on average another 23 minutes to get back to the level of concentration that we were at prior to the disruption.\(^1\) If a
student is studying for an hour and is interrupted twice, the consequence to study efficiency is devastating.

One way to try to monitor how many interruptions you incur and how well you maintain your level of concentration is to keep track of it. Take a blank piece of paper when you are studying and mark down each time you were interrupted.

Over time, with practice, you should be able to decrease the number of interruptions you incur. This will allow you to be most efficient when studying.

I always find it odd to think that before mobile phones, we invented the answering machine. Its purpose was to allow us to receive a message when someone called if we were not home or it was not convenient to answer the phone at the time. In contrast, text messaging is designed in most cases (user’s notification preferences) to interrupt us and alert us immediately that someone has contacted us. Whatever your opinion may be on this, my point is to tread cautiously when using technology that may be addicting and may frequently (consciously or unconsciously) distract you from studying and concentrating.

Author’s Story

When I was a first-year student in college, I lived in the dormitories and enjoyed socializing with my friends. I didn’t want to miss out on any social interaction opportunities, so I waited to study after everyone else was asleep. I regularly studied from midnight to two or three in the morning. I would not ordinarily suggest this for most students. It worked for me because I did not have any early morning classes or work. I took my classes in the late morning and afternoon, worked in the afternoon, and attended basketball practices in the afternoon or early evening. I was able to stay awake and concentrate well at that age and also be able to get adequate sleep. However, if I was studying for an exam or doing the heavy work on a paper, I would do it in the morning because that was when I concentrated the best. Now, almost two decades after college, as someone who works full time and takes care of two young children, there is no way I could stay up that late and be productive on a regular basis. It’s important to find out what works best for you, and it’s also important to understand how the environment you are in effects your concentration ability.

Multitasking

Millennials are considered extraordinary multitaskers, though brain science tells us that multitasking is a myth\(^2\). More likely, they are apt to switch tasks quickly enough to appear to be doing them simultaneously. When it comes to heavy media multitasking, studies show greater vulnerability to interference, leading to decreased performance\(^3\).

My classes have had lively discussions on multitasking. Most of the time, I am able to convince students that multitasking is not a good idea for them. (There are always a few stubborn hold outs). Trying to do multiple things at the same time may seem like it may allow you to accomplish more but when studying it often leads to accomplishing less. There are things that I think can be successfully multitasked. I could throw clothes in the washer and make a snack, then eat and read a book at the same time while waiting for the clothes to be washed. But if I try to text, check e-mail, watch TV and look at my Twitter timeline all while studying, it won’t work well.

A study from Carnegie Mellon University found that driving while listening to a cell phone reduces the amount of brain activity associated with driving by 37 percent\(^4\). Why would anyone choose to use less brain activity when they study?

