

Control of Your Study Environment

- Set aside a fixed place for study and nothing but study. Do you have a place for study you can call your own? As long as you are going to study, you may as well use the best possible environment. It should be reasonably quiet and relatively free of distractions like radio, TV, and people. But that is not absolutely necessary. Several surveys suggest that 80% of a student's study is done in his or her own room, not in a library or study hall. A place where you are used to studying and to doing nothing else is the best of all possible worlds. After a while, study becomes the appropriate behavior in that particular environment. Then, whenever you sit down in that particular niche in the world you'll feel like going right to work. Look at it this way: when you come into a classroom, you sit down and go to work by paying attention to the instructor. Your attitude and attention and behavior are automatic because in the past, the room has been associated with attentive listening and not much else. If you can arrange the same kind of situation for the place where you study, you will find it easier to sit down and start studying.
- Before you begin an assignment, write down on a sheet of paper the time you expect to finish. Keep a record of your goal setting. This one step will not take any time at all. However, it can be extremely effective. It may put just the slightest bit of pressure on you, enough so that your study behavior will become instantly more efficient. Keep the goal sheets as a record of your study efficiency. Try setting slightly higher goals in successive evenings. Don't try to make fantastic increases in rate. Just increase the goal a bit at a time. However, you don't want to concentrate on more study time, but more effective study.
- Strengthen your ability to concentrate by selecting a social symbol that is related to study. Select one particular article of clothing, like a scarf or hat, or a new little figurine or totem. Just before you start to study, put on the cap, or set your little figurine on the desk. The ceremony will aid concentration in two ways. First of all, it will be a signal to other people that you are working, and they should kindly not disturb you. Second, going through a short, regular ritual will help you get down to work. Be sure you don't use the cap or your figurine when you're writing letters or daydreaming or just horsing around. Keep them just for studying. If it gets associated with anything besides books, get a new one. You must be very careful that it doesn't become a symbol for daydreaming.
- If your mind wanders, stand up and face away from your books. Don't sit at your desk staring into a book and mumbling about your poor will power. If you do, your book soon becomes associated with daydreaming and guilt. If you must daydream, and we all do it occasionally, get up and turn around. Don't leave the room—just stand by your desk, daydreaming while you face away from your assignment. The physical act of standing up helps bring your thinking back to the job. Try it! You'll find that soon just telling yourself, "I should stand up now," will be enough to get you back on the track.

- Stop at the end of each page, and count to 10 slowly when you are reading. This is an idea that may increase your study time, and it will be quite useful to you if you find you can't concentrate and your mind is wandering. If someone were to ask you, "What have you read about?" and the only answer you could give is, "About thirty minutes," then you need to apply this technique. But remember, it is only useful if you can't concentrate—as a sort of emergency procedure.
- Set aside a certain time to begin studying. Certain behavior usually is habitual at certain times of the day. If you examine your day carefully, you'll find that you tend to do certain things at predictable times. There may be changes from day to day, but, generally parts of your behavior are habitual and time controlled. If you would be honest with yourself, you'd realize that time controlled behavior is fairly easy to start. The point is that if you can make studying—or at least some of your studying—habitual, it will be a lot easier to start. And if the behavior is started at a habitual time, you will find it is easier to start and easier to get going without daydreaming or talking about other things.
- Don't start any unfinished business just before the time to start studying. Most people tend to think about jobs they haven't finished or obligations they have to fulfill much more than things that they have done and gotten out of the way. Not-completed activities tend to be remembered much longer than completed ones. If we apply that idea to the habit of daydreaming, you might suspect that uncompleted activities and obligations would be more likely to crop up as a source of daydreaming than completed ones. Therefore, when you know you're about to start studying because it's the time you select to begin, don't get involved in long discussions. Try to be habitual with the time you start, and be careful what you do before you start studying. This can be one way to improve your ability to concentrate.
- Set small, short-range goals for yourself. Divide your assignment into subsections. Set a time when you will have finished the first page of the assignment, etc. If you are doing math, set a time goal for the solution of each problem. In other words, divide your assignments into small units. Set time goals for each one. You will find that this is a way to increase your ability to study without daydreaming.
- Keep a reminder pad. Another trick that helps increase your ability to concentrate is to keep pencil and paper by your notebook. If while you're studying you happen to think about something that needs to be done, jot it down. Having written it down you can go back to studying. You'll know that if you look at the pad later, you will be reminded of the things you have to do. It's worrying about forgetting the things you have to do that might be interfering with your studying. A lot of workshop and seminar leaders use this technique and call it a "parking lot" for good ideas that come up, but that could take the group off schedule.

- Relax completely before you start to study. One approach to concentration is to ask yourself: “Do study and bookwork scare me?” If you have to do something unpleasant, something that you know you may do badly, how do you react? Probably you put it off as long as possible, find yourself daydreaming, and would welcome reasons to stop studying. If you do react this way, you might be said to suffer from learned book-anxiety. The key to breaking this book-anxiety daydream series is learning how to relax. When you are physically, deeply, and completely relaxed, it is almost impossible to feel any anxiety. Associate the book with relaxation, not with tension and anxiety. When you study, study; when you worry, worry. Don’t do both at the same time.

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