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21 Ways to Stay Focused in an Online Class

posted by Mark on April 10th, 2009



Perhaps the biggest [challenge of taking an online class](#) is the solitude. Without the in-person stimulus and support of faculty and classmates, online students need more self-reliance and discipline than traditional students when it comes to remaining focused on the workload.

The inability to focus properly is a larger problem than people recognize; most people who have memory problems actually have *focus* problems. That is, they don't effectively absorb the data to begin with, making it easy to slip from their minds. Here are 21 ways to improve your concentration – and thus your ability to retain information – when taking an online (or offline, for that matter) class.

1. **Start the day right.** Don't skip breakfast, and find time for a bit of exercise; together, these activities will give you an energy boost throughout the day.
2. **Get organized.** Whether your school materials are online or offline, keep them organized in separate folders for each class. You'll save time and ease the stress of trying to find notes and other materials when it's time to study for the exam, eliminating at least one distraction. Create shortcuts on your computer to help you access the folders easily.
3. **Establish a comfortable, dedicated study area.** Make sure your chair and table

are comfortable and ergonomic and that your lighting is adequate to avoid eye strain that could cause headaches and drowsiness. However, avoid areas that are TOO comfy (your bed, a hot tub), lest you go drifting off into dreamland.

4. **Avoid distractions.** Turn off the TV and the cell phone. Put a “do not disturb” sign on your door. Set your Instant Messenger status to “unavailable.” Close unused Web browser windows. Don’t play music that could make you want to sing along or get up and shake you groove thing every 10 minutes.
5. **Set a routine.** Set up an efficient study schedule by finding your “comfort zone,” the time of day when you feel most energetic, when your concentration ability is at its peak, and schedule your toughest workload for that time. (Note: if your comfort zone is 3:00 AM, you might want to try adjusting your body’s schedule. Or you might be vampire.)
6. **Have a plan.** Every day, make a list of the school tasks you need to accomplish – reading, writing, studying, whatever – and stick to it. When you start working, set a goal for what you want to accomplish in that sitting, and visualize how good you’ll feel once you do so. Setting a reasonable time limit for each of your tasks will help you avoid procrastinating, since you’ll be able to focus on the task more diligently if you see a light at the end of the tunnel.
7. **Take notes/highlight.** Writing notes or highlighting text gives you an active role in the learning process, discouraging your mind from wandering.
8. **Create incentives.** Give yourself a treat – a brief phone call, checking the score on the game, a carrot on a stick – when you complete a specific task. Working towards a reward helps keep you focused on completing the task.
9. **Create variety.** If possible, switch topics or activities (reading vs. taking notes vs. writing down questions vs. going over lectures) every couple of hours to keep your brain on its toes (my apologies to your anatomy professor).
10. **Take breaks.** Take a 5- to 10-minute break every 45 minutes to help maintain stamina and concentration. Do something active if possible – stretch, take a short walk, do some jumping jacks – to keep your blood pumping.
11. **Drink water.** Not only is drinking water [good for your health](#), but it can also help you stay focused by preventing headaches and fatigue and by providing a tactile jolt in your body. Plus, the resulting restroom breaks provide physical activity that will help maintain your energy level.
12. **Block out noise.** Wear ear plugs or use a fan or other device to create “white noise” that will help block outside noise that could distract you.
13. **Make associations.** If possible, make connections between what you’re learning and your everyday life. Making the information meaningful to you will make it easier to learn and remember. Create a memorable context for your learning experience by adding visual, auditory, tactile or other stimuli to enhance your memory of the details. By adding information to the fact, you create multiple points of reference to access the fact. For instance, relating the capital of Albania to a childhood memory or a lyric from your favorite song or the punchline from a joke makes learning not only more fun, but it also makes the fact easier to remember. (It’s Tirana, by the way.)
14. **Keep yourself in check.** When you feel your mind drifting away from the task at hand, give yourself a mental splash in the face by telling yourself to FOCUS. Remind yourself of the incentive waiting for you when you finish the next task at

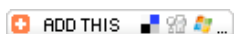
hand. When distracting thoughts or concerns creep into your mind (bills, taxes, rent, etc.), tell yourself you'll worry about them later; focus on one thing at a time. If all else fails, when your mind wanders, stand up for a while as you study; the physical shift might help remind you to focus.

15. **Doodle.** A 2009 study revealed that doodling might actually [help your focus and memory](#) by keeping your brain alert and grounded in the real world. (^^)
16. **Study with a partner.** If it's difficult to coordinate studying with a classmate online, get a friend, roommate or family member to quiz you. Interacting with another person in the course of learning creates an association (see #13) that makes the information easier to recall.
17. **Use a school email address.** Set up an email address dedicated solely to your school work. Receiving school email mixed in with your personal email provides too many opportunities to become sidetracked by chain letters, top 10 lists and YouTube links of [wacky cat antics](#).
18. **Use offline tools.** Staring at a computer screen for hours can prove numbing, so try using physical tools like pens, paper, books or printouts now and then to reduce the monotony. Some people find “real world” studying like this helps their retention.
19. **Get some sleep.** Even if you feel like you're being productive, if it's time for bed, GO TO BED. Get as close to eight hours of sleep as possible every night. Too little sleep will cause your mind to wander and will impede your focus and comprehension. The time you save by staying up an extra hour or two at night will be wasted the next day when it takes you two hours to read a single page.
20. **Eat right.** A healthy diet promotes overall well-being, both physical and mental, [improving your ability to concentrate](#). Be wary of caffeine; it can prove energizing in the short run, but on a long-term basis, it's not a healthy option.
21. **Avoid stress.** It's easier said than done, but lessen the stress in your life by confronting the source of your anxiety. Granted, school is probably one of the sources of stress, but maybe you can lessen your course load by dropping a class. Or maybe you just need to distance yourself from certain people in your life – at least until the end of the semester.

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