

BREAKS AND REWARDS

WHY ARE BREAKS IMPORTANT?

Breaks and rewards are two of the most underrated, yet important, aspects of effective time planning. Students who are stressed and feeling pressured may think that they don't have time to take breaks and often try to work for long, sustained periods lasting hours. The things that make studying effective - concentration, metacognition, and motivation - get lower and lower while stress and exhaustion increase exponentially when students grind on hour after hour. No matter how busy or under pressure you are, you need to take breaks. Why?



BREAKS HAVE SEVERAL IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS:

- they allow your brain some time to digest and process the information you're putting into it
- they help to reduce stress, sustain motivation and increase productivity
- they provide a transition period when switching subjects or tasks within a long study period
- they can play a significant role in improving concentration
- if spent with a friend, breaks can help to reduce the isolation some students feel when studying.

DO'S AND DON'TS

The biggest problems students have when taking breaks is limiting them and getting back to work. Here are some do's and don'ts that might help:

- DO set a reasonable time limit and try to stick to it.
- DO make the time limit appropriate to the length of time you've spent working. Ten minutes per hour of studying is often given as a rule of thumb, but it all depends on your concentration at the time. Generally, the longer you've been working, the longer break you need.
- DO also realize and plan that the longer you've been working, the more frequently you will need to take breaks.
- DO use some kind of audible signal to let you know when it's time to get back to work. A kitchen timer or the microwave works well at home, or use that annoying little beep thing on your watch. You might also want to build in a 2-minute warning.
- DO get up and get away from wherever you've been sitting, even if it's just walking from a desk to a window.
- DO activities during breaks that are short, preferably physically stimulating (but not TOO stimulating!), and as unlike studying as possible - stretch, jog on the spot, run up and down some stairs, get some fresh air, splash cold water on your face, etc.
- DON'T undertake activities during breaks that can be too engaging or have the potential to expand in the amount of time they'll require, like reading, talking to a friend, or house cleaning.
- DO stay away from Facebook, email, MSN and television.

LONGER BREAKS OR 'VACATIONS'

If you're laying out a schedule for the work on a major project, particularly if the project will occupy more of your time than anything else (like a thesis), it's important to plan in some major breaks or "mini vacations" from the project. Long breaks can also serve as a reward because typically they are scheduled when a milestone has been reached in the project - the end of a stage in the research or the completion of a chapter, for example.

A major break doesn't have to be scheduled at one of these milestones to be effective, but there's a risk of losing momentum if you take a hiatus in the middle of a chapter or section. On the other hand, if you're stuck and feeling in a rut, a major break might be just what you need to recharge your motivation and get a fresh perspective on the topic. Planning a "mini vacation" from a big project requires foresight and advanced planning. Whether it's a day, a weekend or an entire week or more, periodic long breaks can be essential in circumventing burnout and maintaining motivation through the course of a long project.

REWARDS

Rewards are another important part of using time effectively. Some students dismiss them as a form of self-bribery or manipulation, and others claim they just back-fire by making people feel worse when they don't accomplish what they wanted to and don't "deserve" the reward. Students sometimes have mixed results with using rewards as a time planning or motivation strategy; however, a negative outcome may be the result of not using them effectively, rather than them being a flawed strategy. Here are some guidelines to use when deciding how and when to reward yourself:

- Make it *fit the accomplishment*.
Giving yourself something major for achieving something small will soon become meaningless; conversely giving a small reward for a big accomplishment will squash the reward's power to motivate and satisfy.
- Make it *realistic*.
Don't plan something that you can't afford, or that hinges on someone else agreeing to do something.
- Make it *immediate*.
It's not very motivating right now to promise yourself something that will occur several weeks away.
- Make it *non-distracting*.
Deciding you'll ask out your new housemate when you're done your essay might make it difficult to focus on the task at hand.
- Make it *healthy*.
Use caffeine, alcohol and chocolate in moderation.
- Make it *meaningful*.
Cleaning out the fridge or doing the dishes is not a reward. Unless, of course, you really like that sort of thing...
- Make it *positive*.
Don't set up a "punishment" if you don't do something rather than a reward if you do.
- Make it *specific*.
"I'll go to a movie with Ben" is better than "I'll go out somewhere."