

ISSUES WITH CONCENTRATION

TIME PLANNING ISSUES

Some of the most common problems students experience with concentration are related to the way they plan their time. Take care that your time planning isn't creating or exacerbating these problems with concentration.

A major issue for many is their concentration span, or lack thereof. Students often complain that their minds begin to wander only 10 or 15 minutes after sitting down to work, or that they read the same page over and over again and still don't know what's on it. In our experience these students have unrealistic assumptions or beliefs about how long they should be able to concentrate. For example, they'll spend hours at a time on the same type of task (like reading), and then, at the end, feel frustrated and worried when they can't remember much, if any, of what they've just read. Like other academic tasks that require intense focus and an active approach to learning, "study" reading (as opposed to reading a novel for pleasure) is more effective when done in short, distributed amounts. See [Break It Up](#) for details on how to plan in this way. Very few students can sit down for hours at a stretch with a dense, complex, academic text and remember the material in any detail.



It's important to realize that your concentration span can vary tremendously depending on the type of task, your motivation to do the work, your interest in the subject, how tired or ill you're feeling at that point, what else is happening in your life that you may be thinking about, etc. It's not much use to try to force yourself to concentrate for X number of minutes or hours because you think you should be able to. Rather than struggle against your ability to concentrate, it's essential to work with it. If you find that your mind begins to wander after 10 or 15 minutes of reading, then stop and take a 5 minute break. Get up and stretch, jog on the spot to get your blood flowing, throw some cold water on your face, get a breath of fresh air, get a coffee (but watch the caffeine.....) and go back to work. Try a reading approach like [SQ4R](#) to help you to focus. Monitor your concentration instead of counting how many pages are left in the chapter.

If you take a 5 minute break every 15 minutes, by the end of 60 minutes you'll have done 45 minutes of solid reading. If you sit there after 15 minutes and wonder why you can't concentrate and then scold and berate yourself for not being able to focus, you'll probably spend a lot more of the next 45 minutes fretting and guilt-tripping yourself than you will reading. The point is not to worry about how long you "should" be able to concentrate. What matters is that you pay attention to your learning and work with your ability to concentrate on that particular day, under those particular circumstances.

For some concrete strategies for enhancing your concentration, particularly when you're distracted by a personal issue, see the *Internal Study Environment* in [Managing Distractions](#).