

**Concentrating and Reading**

*One of the most frequent complaints students make is that it’s too hard to concentrate on textbook reading assignments. How often do you hear yourself say, “I can’t concentrate!” But is this true? What about all the things you can concentrate on? Isn’t the problem that we really find it harder to pay attention because we don’t like to read our texts as much as the latest music or movie review, fashion magazine, or the sports page? Here are some strategies that many students have found helpful to overcome this problem.*

**What is reading, anyway?**

You may think this is a silly question, but how did you answer it? Did you think of reading as your eyes moving across a page and words jumping into your head? Or did you consider that reading is actually a conversation between you and the author? If you think of reading as the way an author talks to you, it is easier to see what you can do to stay interested and find ways to improve your concentration.

When reading, because the author communicates to you through the words on the page, the conversation is from the author to you. Now imagine having that kind of discussion with your family or friends. Would you just not say anything when others were talking to you? Or would you join in, offer your opinions, ask questions when you didn’t understand what they meant, or even argue? Most of us would want to actively participate in what was being talked about. This active participation is the same key to improving your concentration when reading.

**How do I get actively involved when reading?**

There are many strategies you can use to become an active reader. You can think of some yourself. To get you started, here are a few to try. The more techniques you use, the easier it will be to stay focused on your reading.

**Ask Yourself Questions**

The key to maintaining focus is to stop periodically and ask yourself questions. Besides improving your concentration, you will also check for how well you have understood what you have read, find the areas you don’t understand yet, connect information to what you already know and improve memory, and anticipate possible test questions. You will also have questions to ask in class or when you visit your professor’s office.

So what do you ask? Here are some examples:

* How does this relate to what I already know?
* If this is true, what else follows?
* What else could these facts mean?
* What assumptions are being made?
* What’s the evidence for this?
* Can I think of a good example of this?
* What are the unique points of this?

Another technique is to read the **bold** headings in the chapter and turn those into questions. Here’s an example from a sociology text.

**India: A Different Kind of Poverty**

Do I know where India is located? Can I easily find it on a map?

Why is poverty in India different? Different from what? Where?

What measures were used to determine the levels of poverty in India?

How would I feel if I were poor and lived in India? How would I be treated?

**Read—Write—Speak—Think**

Find ways to do something! Moving your eyeballs isn’t reading. It isn’t thinking either. In order to read, your brain has to become involved. Here are some things to do to help this happen.

* Use a pencil mark to check off each paragraph that you *completely* understand. If you start to get lost in the reading, you will know exactly where: just after the last check.
* If a section is too difficult for you, try reading it out loud. Whispering is ok! Hearing what we read is like reading it a second time. If you see it and hear it you will understand and remember the information better and faster.
* Try to link new information with the information you already know. Ask yourself, “How do I already know this?” You can also ask yourself questions such as those listed above. Active linking creates powerful memories.
* Take a few seconds to write down key words and concepts. Draw pictures or diagrams. If you “read, ‘rite, and recite (RRR), you’ve got a better chance of retaining crucial information. Seeing, doing, and hearing is the best formula to increase concentration and memory!
* After taking a short break from studying and before you begin again, take a few minutes to review the information you have just learned. This will give you a sense of progress and motivate you to continue. It will also tell you which areas you need to review before you start studying new information. When you are in charge of your learning this way, your confidence will increase and you will feel better prepared when it’s time for your exams.

**Read the Ideas**

We often become confused or discouraged when we focus on the words on the page instead of the ideas. If we stop and look up all the words we don’t know in the dictionary, we forget what we are reading about and have to start all over. Instead, read the entire paragraph or section or page without stopping. When you keep reading, the ideas will become more important than the words and understanding is easier. You can always go back, circle and look up the words you aren’t sure of—they aren’t going anywhere!

Once you have read a paragraph or page or section, try the following strategy:

* Stop and close your book.
* Think about the information you have read and what you remember.
* Tell yourself out loud what you know. If you can’t say it, you haven’t learned it. But don’t get upset or start negative messages to yourself. Simply open the book, reread the same paragraph or page or section, then try this again.
* If you find you have to reread numerous times before you can remember most of the information, break the information up into smaller sections, i.e. a paragraph instead of a page, a few sentences instead of a paragraph. Do what works for you!

**What it means to study!**

Studying is the process that is used to decide what to learn and what to remember and recall.—James F. Shepherd