

Focus and Concentration

Being able to concentrate on schoolwork is critical for learning and studying. It's also a skill that you can develop. Read on for some strategies that may help.

Set yourself up for success

Your work area

- Do you know what you need to work on right now, how, and why?
- Do you have a place where you can work uninterrupted?
- Are your supplies close at hand?
- Do you have good lighting and a comfortable chair (don't study on your bed!)?
- Are your devices off, or on silent, and out of sight? (If you need to be online to complete your work, block distracting websites.)

Create homework habits

- What time of day do you focus best? Do your most challenging work then.
- Develop a routine place, time, and approach.
- Try working for 50 minutes, then taking a 10-minute break, repeated 2-3 times.
- **Or** try working for 25 minutes, then taking a 5-minute break, repeated 4-6 times.
- Try varying the subjects / tasks in each long study session.
- Break up large projects into manageable sections. Congratulate yourself for completing individual sections.

Support your health

- Eat regularly to give your brain energy.
- Sleep enough to feel rested and alert.
- Exercise to reduce restlessness, manage stress and feel good. Getting fresh air before class or homework time may help you be more alert.

Manage distractions

Distracted by YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and texts? You're not alone. **23.4% of Queen's students** reported that internet use/computer games **affected their academic performance** within the last 12 months (see [NCHA Student Health and Wellness Survey](#)).

Technology is vital to everyday tasks, but our dependence on technology can turn into a **habit** that prevents us from getting our work done. Learn to intentionally give your attention.



Here are some strategies to try:

When you need to focus on a task...

Ask yourself, “Do I need my computer / phone / device for this task?”

No, I don't need it.

- leave laptop at home
- log out and close laptop; put out of sight in a backpack or drawer; turn off wifi
- put phone on airplane mode/on silent, out of sight in a backpack or drawer
- check for notifications on long (1-2 hour) breaks, not short (5-10 minute) breaks

Yes, I do need it.

- block unnecessary sites with apps
- check for notifications on long (1-2 hour) breaks, not short (5-10 minute) breaks
- when you're tempted by a distraction, ask yourself, “why am I doing this? Will it support my goals?”
- challenge yourself to go five more minutes without checking your phone/social media

Increasing the physical distance between you and your phone / laptop, or increasing the time / effort required to check notifications, may help you manage your impulses.

When you want to avoid your phone...

- With a trusted roommate/friend, **lock your phones and swap them** for a couple of hours when you really want to focus.
- Check your phone and social media only at **specific times** during the day, such as every two hours, or after breakfast, lunch, and dinner.
- **Let your family and friends know** you're not available during work time unless it's an emergency. Tell them you're trying to change your online habits to support your academic/health goals and ask for their support.
- **Ask yourself**, “Tonight, when I look back on my day, what would make me feel as though it was a **good day, well-spent**? What can I do right now to contribute to that satisfaction?”
- Charge your phone in another room, or put it on airplane mode, **while you sleep**.
- Try thinking of time away from your phone as **liberating**, a chance to be yourself and to do things that you love to do.

When you do check your phone...

- **Track how much time** you spend on your phone / laptop for non-work activity. Lots of apps exist that help you track phone usage.
- **Set a timer** to remind yourself to return to work after a break. Or have an accountability buddy who helps you get back to work after a break.
- **Combine your phone check with a look at your daily to-do list/weekly schedule**, to help you remember that you had planned to get something specific done in this time.

- Remember you can do **non-phone things** on a break, like stretching, running up and down stairs, taking a short walk, getting a coffee, listening to a song with your eyes closed, etc.
- If you fear letting down family and friends by not responding to their messages, **commit to responding on breaks, or later that day, instead of instantly.**

When your thoughts distract you...

Get **distracting thoughts** out of your head by writing them down on a nearby pad of paper. Set aside a bit of time each evening to review your distractions:

- some items may be trivial and can be forgotten
- some items may be important—turn these into specific actions and add them to your to-do list
- discuss ongoing, distressing thoughts with someone.

Track your attention: if you're distracted while you're trying to work, try making a check mark on a nearby pad of paper, then turn your attention back to work. Later, look for patterns. Do your thoughts wander when you are tired, hungry, restless or worried? Think about your improving your health habits and/or talking to someone about your worries.

Minimize or manage distractions that you have some control over; for example, ask your friends and family to help you protect your work time, and reassure them that you will be available to them other hours of the day.

If these strategies aren't helpful, remember that giving into online distraction can be a very difficult habit to change. Don't expect to go from constantly distracted to perfectly focused in a day. Try one or two of the strategies above for a week or two, then try a couple more for another week, and aim for slow but solid improvement over time. You might also consider booking an **appointment** with a counsellor to talk about how to break a habit.

Get to work

Get started

- Keep all necessary supplies close at hand to avoid set-up time and distractions.
- If a large task seems daunting, break it down into several smaller, specific tasks. Still daunted? Make them smaller.
- Try the "5 more rule." Commit to working for five (minutes, pages, sentences, etc.) and then do it. Then decide to work another 5 more or not.
- Start each work session with 10 minutes of review of the most recent material, to reinforce previous learning and boost your confidence.

Work within your attention span

Rather than becoming frustrated about lack of focus, learn to work within the limits of your attention span.



- First, **find the limits** of your attention for a particular task or subject. Can you stay focused for 10 minutes? 20 minutes?
- Try setting a regular 5-minute timer, and when it goes off, ask yourself if you are still engaged in the task. Mark down when your attention begins to wane.
- Once you have established your attention span for a course, **divide your work into chunks** that will take that long to complete. For example:
 - You have about a 30-minute attention span for working on a case study in your Commerce class. Divide the project into reading the assignment for 30 minutes, then finding 3 research articles for 30 minutes, etc.
- **Take 5 minute breaks** between work sessions. Use a timer to keep you on track, both for your working sessions and for your breaks. You can set up your phone to help you, or search for an online timer that will time your work sessions and breaks.
- **Do your hardest work** (the most difficult stuff, the boring stuff) at the time of day when you are most alert.

Motivate yourself

- Remind yourself of how the task you're trying to focus on will help you meet a longer-term goal.
- Set a specific target in terms of time spent on a task, or amount of work to complete.
- Work before you play. Build in a reward for successfully reaching your goal: a coffee, chat, walk, or something you enjoy that you must earn before you have it.

It is much easier to focus if you're interested in a task, but what if you **aren't interested?**

Try active studying strategies:

- Ask yourself questions.
- Relate the information to your personal experience or to your other courses.
- Think about the topic's real-world implications. Ask "what if" questions.
- Make up your own examples.

Try reminding yourself how this task will help you achieve an exciting goal.

Keep in mind that sometimes you just have to do something you don't want to do; consider it good for character development and get on with it.

Use self-talk to stay on task

Self-talk can help you get started and stay on track. Congratulate yourself for staying on track, or remind yourself where your attention should be. Keep practicing; over time, you can develop a habit that keeps you motivated and focused.

Examples of encouraging self-talk:

- If I get started now, I'll feel less stressed later.
- I'm really making progress on this paper.
- I've been working for 30 minutes without distraction, yay!



- What is most important right now?
- How long have I been on this website?
- Is what I'm doing now helping me reach my goals?

Study with a friend

Studying with someone else can help you stay on track and re-focus if you find yourself distracted. Just seeing a friend working can be a great way to stay motivated, and if one of you gets distracted, the other can offer a friendly reminder to get back to work.

You can also hold each other accountable for your progress on weekly goals. Tell each other what you've done over the week, and what you want to accomplish next week.

In lectures

- From the readings or problem sets, come up with questions in advance. You don't have to actually ask them, unless you want to; just listen for the answers during lecture.
- Reduce distractions: get to class in time to pick your best seat—whatever works for you.
- Stay awake: take notes during the lecture, and ask questions.
- Use a code in your notes to mark things that you don't understand, or that seem important.
- If the lecture has a break, try to get outside for some fresh air.
- Engage your mind by participating in class and thinking actively:
 - offer your opinion
 - think about how the material relates to recent lectures or readings
 - try to anticipate the professor's next idea
 - ask questions, out loud or in your mind.

More resources

The following campus resources helped create content for this web page, and can offer more support.

- Check out [Health Promotion](#) to learn more about sleep and other health issues affecting university students, or to book a Healthy Lifestyle Consultation.
- Talk to someone at [Counselling Services](#) about distracting and distressing thoughts, or maintaining a healthy relationship with technology.
- Visit the [Faith and Spiritual Life Office](#) to talk about distracting and distressing thoughts, or technology from a spiritual and/or community perspective.
- [Student Academic Success Services](#) can suggest strategies that support concentration.

[1] American College Health Association. *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Queen's University Executive Summary Spring 2013*. Hanover, MD: American College Health Association; 2013.



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