



Office of Learning Resources

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I Just Can't Seem to Concentrate!

Many students have had the experience of reading paragraphs and sometimes pages of text, only to realize they haven't understood any of it because they weren't paying attention. It is a common occurrence for students to notice that their attention often strays from their reading, especially when they have to digest large quantities of dense and complex material in textbooks and bulkpack articles. The obstacles to concentration that students typically face include fatigue, distractions (personal, social, emotional), or anxiety about completing assignments. By understanding what is interfering with your concentration and by making it a habit to monitor your concentration you can avoid the *wandering mind syndrome*.

On your own, you should develop the habit of monitoring your reading so as to avoid comprehension gaps. Through their work at the Cognitive Learning Strategies Project at the University of Texas, Weinstein and Rogers have seen that students who read actively will plan, monitor, evaluate, and correct their strategies while reading; as a result, they comprehend the material better. By watching for some particular cues, students can realize for themselves when they are beginning to comprehend less. Some of the cues are:

- you haven't understood particular words or sentences;
- you often have to slow down and re-read;
- everything or nothing seems important.

If these comprehension gaps occur, strengthen your comprehension by:

- rephrasing paragraphs in your own words;
- reading aloud;
- underlining or making notes of ideas that stand out for you.

Obviously, sufficient rest will keep you awake enough to read effectively. You should read in an environment that is free from distractions. Also, take note of those times of day when you are most alert and awake so that you can study during those peak periods. Establish goals for how much you will read in any given session and stick to them; then give yourself a reward after you have achieved that goal. Observe your own reading to determine how long you can concentrate before you get restless.

When you notice that you simply haven't been paying attention to what you've "read," ask yourself what other thoughts or feelings might be distracting you. Keep a notepad

nearby and jot down those thoughts to clear them from your mind. Use the power of positive thinking and tell yourself that you will not allow these distractions or anxieties to overwhelm you.

If you are having serious difficulties, consider whether you need to speak to a counselor or academic advisor. A Learning Instructor may be able to give you some direction if you're concerned or confused about what may be interfering with your concentration. If you find that you need some assistance in order to refine your ability to concentrate better, make an appointment with a Learning Instructor at your earliest convenience.

Reference: Weinstein, C.E. and Rogers, B.T. (n.d.). Comprehension Monitoring: the neglected learning strategy, Journal of Developmental Education, 9 (1).