

Attention and Focus

There are many barriers to maintaining attention and focus—especially today when an infinite number of exciting movies, TV series, podcasts, social media updates, and apps are available at the click of a button. Focusing on course material, which may feel boring and difficult by comparison, is challenging and requires intentionality. Below we share five strategies to strengthen focus and keep your attention on coursework.

1. Minimize distractions

Internal Distractions come from our own mind and body. We could be distracted by feeling hungry or sleepy. We could also be distracted by our thoughts and emotions such as feeling bored and unmotivated, or, alternatively, overwhelmed and inadequate.

- Practice [self-care](#) and ensure physical needs are being met. Sleeping an adequate amount (about 8 hours every night) is critical to maintaining attention, which becomes more difficult with sleep deprivation.
- Mindset – sometimes we get caught up in a particular mindset that makes activities related to learning more difficult. If we believe a task is beyond our capabilities, then it's difficult to be motivated to do it at all. Cultivating a growth mindset can encourage engagement.

External Distractions come from our environment. They likely include: app notifications; family, friends, or roommates; and aspects of our physical surroundings.

- Organize and manage digital distractions. Silence notifications and intentionally check apps at a designated time. [Organize apps](#) on home pages of your devices by making distracting apps (like social media) less accessible and productivity apps more available.
- Curate your physical space. Find space away from distracting people or situations. Use headphones to your advantage with background noise apps (like Noisli or Atmosphere). Have items you need (notebooks, pens, highlighters) at hand.



2. Battle boredom: Generate questions and set time-restraints

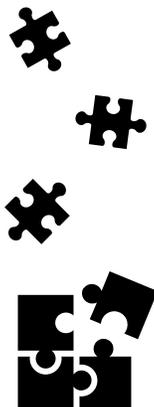
Simply reviewing course material (that is reading and re-reading notes or texts) can become boring even if you do have an interest in the topic! We can trick our brains into staying focused by implementing particular study strategies and building in time-restraints.

Timed study sessions will give you focus and drive. Have you ever heard that work expands to fill available time? Set a goal for each study session and set a timer for completing it (maybe 30 minutes). See our study cycle worksheet for guidance setting goals and organizing your study session. See if you can reach your goal or how much progress you can make towards your goal!

Active reading and studying

Generate questions to answer for yourself when reading and studying. This practice will draw attention to the material. Ask yourself:

- *How, why, and what if* questions about concepts you're studying.
- Could I teach this concept to someone else? If not, what information/knowledge am I missing?
- When reading, preview the text and develop questions to answer during the reading.



Elaboration as a study technique is the act of adding new information to memories you already have. It can be especially powerful if you can tie the new information to emotional memories.

- How is this topic/concept relevant to me?
- Can I tie this information to any of my interests?
- How is this similar to what I've learned previously?

See our *General Reading Strategies* and *Active Studying* handouts for more information.

3. Organize and prioritize tasks

The urgency and importance grid (below) is a way to organize and prioritize your tasks and recognize distractions. Create a list of to-do items or tasks. Then, organize these tasks into each of the quadrants shown in the grid. Consider your own goals and values when determining what should go in the important and not-important categories. Spend time on tasks in quadrant I and II and minimize time spent on things in quadrants III and IV.

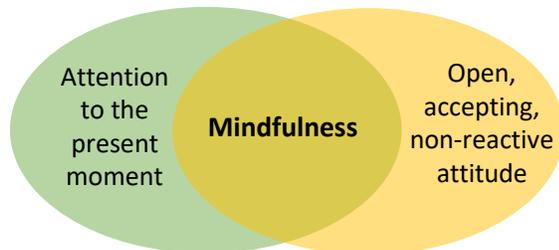
How will the grid improve attention and focus?

- Curates motivation by orienting tasks (especially in quadrant II) with *your personal goals and values*, so they are (and feel) more relevant. An increase in relevancy may minimize mind-wandering and internal distractions.
- May calm distracting internal thoughts related to feeling overwhelmed.

	Urgent	Not-urgent
Important	I Assignments due and crises (math exam, call home) Do and plan	II Related to your future (Job/internship search, end-of-term paper)
Not important	III Distractions (News, watching a game, text messages)	IV Time-wasting (watching ten YouTube videos about cat breeds) Minimize doing these

4. Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness exercises improve attention whether they are practiced regularly or right before a study session!



Try an app (such as Calm or Smiling Mind) for guided mindfulness exercises, and get [more information about mindfulness from UO Counseling Services](#).

5. Avoid the pitfalls

Don't multitask

Humans can't concentrate on multiple things at once. Instead, we actually rapidly switch our attention from one thing to another when we "multitask." The processes to switch tasks requires a lot of brain power, and we'll quickly lose our ability to focus.

Do Take breaks

We can only focus for so long! Give yourself permission to take regular breaks. Exercising or napping can be particularly good for the learning process. See our *Taking Study Breaks* handout for more ideas!



References and further reading

- Yana Weinstein, Megan Sumeracki. *Understanding How We Learn*. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Terry Doyle, Todd Zakrajsek. *The New Science of Learning: How to Learn in Harmony with Your Brain*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2013.
- James Lang. *Distracted: Why Students Can't Focus and What You Can Do About It*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.
- Norris, C.; Creem, D.; Hendler, R.; Kober, H., Brief Mindfulness Meditation Improves Attention in Novices: Evidence from ERPs and Moderation by Neuroticism. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* **2018**, *12*, 20.