

AN INTRODUCTION TO CONCENTRATION & MEMORY

Concentration is the ability to focus on the task at hand; the ability to handle distractions.

- Try to identify sources of distraction and either avoid them or learn how to deal with them.
- Take notes in class or while reading to force yourself to concentrate.
- When reading text, stop at the end of each paragraph or two to see if you are aware of what you read.
- If you find yourself unable to concentrate, change activities and come back to what you were doing at a later time.
- Find a quiet and regular place to study.
- Use Mnemonic devices.
- Use the SORR method – Select, Organize, Recode, and Rehearse

CONCENTRATION IS A THREE STEP PROCESS

1) Learn the causes of poor concentration and decide which ones apply to you.

External Causes: Noise-especially conversations and music which interests you.
 Environment-look at your study place. There may be highly distracting things which invite poor concentration (TV, overly comfortable chairs, snacks, other people, etc.).

Internal Causes: Boredom
 Dislike/Anxiety about the subject being studied.
 Daydreaming while reading.
 Worries and personal problems.
 Being overwhelmed by the study task.

2) Understand what you can do to control these factors.

External Causes: If you find yourself paying more attention to people and music than to your books, you may want train yourself to study away from others and in silence.
 Rearrange an environment with too many temptations or go elsewhere to study when you mean business. Be aware of the time of the day or night and the place that you seem to be most alert, and use it.

Internal Causes: To combat boredom and/or a negative attitude, find some satisfying reasons for taking the course and passing it. Talk with other students and/or the instructor.
 One helpful way to diminish anxiety is to check your study skills and make sure you know the most efficient ways to learn the subject. Talk to APSS counselors for specific instructions on how to study for different subjects or types of exams.
 Learn to separate clearly daydreams and reading by beginning to channel your daydreams. When your mind starts to wander, stop and recall important points you have just read. Then turn away from the book and try to continue the fantasy. When you're ready to read again, do so. The trick is not to daydream and read at the same time.
 When personal worries continually interfere, do something concrete to help. Talk with a friend, go exercise for some stress relief, or go to the Psychological Services Office.
 A good way to deal with a study task that seems overwhelming is to break it up into small sections. Try devising a system of "rewards and punishments" for having or not having accomplished what you intended to do.

3) Make your control of these factors habitual!

FOCUS AND CONCENTRATION

This study guide introduces you to key concepts of focus and concentration. Like any other life or academic skill, focus and concentration can be improved through increased knowledge, the identification of techniques and strategies, and continued skill development through practice.

What It Is: Playing in the Zone. You may have noticed that when you are participating in or attending to something of interest and importance to you—a favorite hobby, game, sport, or television program—that you can get quite “lost” in the topic or activity, losing track of time or those around you, for instance. These are, for each of us, moments of profound focus and concentration and we may skip meals, ignore environmental discomforts, and not hear people talking to us. In these cases, focus and concentration may seem quite natural and our performance, should it be required, is probably quite good.

Interest and Motivation. When confronted with a different kind of task, however, like reading micro-economics or solving a set of math problems, we may discover that maintaining high focus and concentration is an arduous and nearly insurmountable challenge. What to do? What great tasks would be accomplished if we could tap into those reservoirs of intensity we’ve experienced at the pool tables or on the sports court?

The key may be to trick ourselves into being interested and motivated. If we don’t particularly care for math we may need to convince ourselves that quadratic equations are crystalline moments of truth in an uncertain and ambiguous world. If you have no special interest in history, try to imagine yourself in those times. Create a mental movie in which you are the star.

Set Short Term Goals. One good way to maintain focus and concentration is to set short term goals: “Tomorrow morning I’m going to spend three solid hours in the library working on my research paper. Each hour I’m going to create four note cards; one note card each 15 minutes.” Note that the goals in this example are achievable (the student has set herself up for success) and specific (a particular kind of activity & behavior is defined that will allow our student to identify success).

Reward Yourself. When you achieve your short term goals, reward yourself in some small, but pleasant way. “So I’ve managed to do three math problems in 50 minutes; time to step outside for 10 minutes of evening air and a good stretch.”

If you don’t make your goal, take a short break anyway and resolve to do better. Be easy on yourself, but also consider some small punishment. (Save that phone call to your friend for another day). What’s more important is that with each hour you consistently:

1. refocus on your objective,
2. make the initial moves to accomplish the objective (Just Do It), and then
3. seek closure. (Having completed 7 out of 10 items—don’t relax—finish strong).

IMPROVING YOUR MEMORY

MEMORY is a storehouse for information; once it is stored, it can never really be lost. When we “forget” we do not mean that the information has disappeared from our brain; we simply cannot find it; we cannot gain access to it.

TWO KINDS OF MEMORY

- A) **Short Term Memory** lasts 15 to 20 seconds; examples—looking up a phone number, listening to directions, reading signs in store windows as we walk through a mall...reading a textbook chapter (when we get to the end and can't remember much of what we read). New information crowds out what is in our short term memory. We must transfer it or lose it within a few seconds.
- B) **Long Term Memory** is where we transfer information to really remember it. This requires a conscious effort. Psychologists call this process “rehearsal.”

MEMORY IS NOT ROTE MEMORIZATION

1. Rote refers to disconnected facts, ideas, etc.—definitions of terms, names of people, isolated events, none of which have any connection to each other.
2. The key to memory is meaning, which requires us to build frameworks for information we are trying to remember. Such frameworks might include:
 - a) sequence—steps in a formula, context of the Boston Tea Party
 - b) cause & effect—a mutation process, the U.S. trade deficit
 - c) cognitive clusters—the Bill of Rights, the 12 cranial nerves
3. We must work to discover or create a framework for information to be stored in our memory.

THE MAGIC NUMBER 7—The human brain can, as a general rule, hold an average of 7 separate bits of information, plus or minus 2, in its memory for a short period of time, or when making a list. This is why the 5 digit zip code is fairly simple to remember, since it falls at the lower end of the range, but why the 9 digit zip code is difficult to remember.

CHUNKING (ASSOCIATION)—This technique is an attempt to consolidate separate items to be remembered into larger chunks, through some type of association, to make them easier to remember.

VISUALIZATION—This is the most powerful memory technique known, and it involves creating pictures in your mind to enhance memory. Not many people can remember where they were or what they were doing on November 22, 1983, but they can remember vividly where they were and what they were doing on that day 20 years earlier, at noon. This is because we have a visual image of that moment, almost burned into our memories. You can do the same thing to help you remember almost anything.

MNEMONICS—These are either sound techniques (rhyme/rhythm) or acronyms.

SAMPLE MNEMONIC MEMORY AIDS

I before E except after C
or with the sounds of A, as in neighbor or weigh.

Thirty days hath September,
April, June, and November.
All the rest have thirty-one, except for February...

For Criminal Justice Class, to memorize the steps in investigating an accident:

Proceed to the scene
Render assistance to injured
Effect the arrest of the perpetrator
Locate and identify witnesses
Interview complainant and witnesses
Maintain the scene and protect evidence
Interrogate suspects
Note all conditions, events, and remarks
Arrange for collection of evidence
Report the incident fully and accurately
Yield responsibility to detectives

To learn the order of the planets; remember the sentence:

Mary Visits Every Monday, Just Staying Until Noon, Period.
(Mercury Venus Earth Mars Jupiter Saturn Uranus Neptune Pluto)

STRATEGIES FOR REMEMBERING WHAT YOU READ

Do you think you have a “bad” memory? Many students believe that memory is automatic, that a “good” memory stores large amounts of information without much effort. The fact is, memory requires the existence of certain conditions and performance of certain operations.

STRATEGIES WHICH ARE *CONDITIONS* FOR MEMORY:

1. Intend to remember

One reason we have so much trouble remembering is that often we do not intend to remember. We say we have forgotten when in fact we have done nothing to try to remember.

There are two parts to the memory system: short and long term memory. The short term memory holds information for very brief periods of time, from 14 to 40 seconds. (Long enough to dial a phone number or “catch” a name.) The disadvantage of short term memory is that it becomes quickly overloaded. It can hold a limited number of ideas for a limited time. The transfer to the long term memory system depends on certain conditions and operations. **Intent** is the first condition. Use the following checklist to determine whether you intend to remember what you read:

- Where do you read? Do you select an environment free from distractions?
- How do you feel about the reading? Are you interested in the topic when you start? If not, are you curious enough to read at least a few paragraphs or pages to see if your interest can develop?
- Do you try to use effective strategies? For example, do you overview before you read? Do you set specific purposes from your overview?

2. Understanding before you try to remember.

Sometimes lack of understanding is confused with lack of memory. We blame our memories for our inability to remember complex ideas when, in fact, we didn’t understand those ideas in the first place. Research indicates that if you understand what you read, it can be learned and remembered up to 15 times faster than when it does not make sense. The following example will show you how much faster you can learn and remember something when it is meaningful. Memorize each column individually, timing yourself to see how long it takes. When you think you know all the words in a column, cover the column and write the words in the order in which they were presented. Go on to the next column. Compare your times for the three columns.

Column 1 (Cover Column 1 as you write you response.)

preft	_____	_____
clurd	_____	_____
trenk	_____	_____
bafted	_____	_____
sote	_____	_____
niven	_____	_____

Check your answers;
If incorrect, try again. Time: _____

Column 2

bad	_____	_____
pop	_____	_____
teeth	_____	_____
candy	_____	_____
good	_____	_____
gum	_____	_____
make	_____	_____

Check your answers;
If incorrect, try again. Time: _____

Column 3

candy	_____	_____
gum	_____	_____
pop	_____	_____
make	_____	_____
good	_____	_____
teeth	_____	_____
bad	_____	_____

Check your answers;
If incorrect, try again. Time: _____

Column 1 was probably the most difficult and took the longest time because it uses nonsense syllables. Column 2 uses words that make sense, but they are in random order. Column 3 uses words that make sense and also form an idea. Therefore, column 3 is easiest to understand and easiest to remember.

3. Allow time to remember.

Each bit of information demands time to be processed; it must be selected, organized, associated, synthesized, recorded, and rehearsed. If you don't allow enough time to process one item before you add another, you may:

- 1) overload the short term memory so you can't remember the items at all;
 - 2) fail to move the items to the long-term system; or
 - 3) quickly forget the items which have been moved to the long-term memory, since they did not have enough time to become permanently fixed.
- Read several paragraphs. Look away from the book; reflect on what you have read; translate it into your own words.
 - As you pause to reflect, associate the ideas with something from your experience.
 - After you have read for 35-45 minutes, stop for five minutes of relaxation. "Sinking-in" time aids memory. You do not have to think about the ideas but you must allow time for them to set. Then return for more information.

STRATEGIES WHICH ARE THE OPERATIONS OF MEMORY: THE SORR METHOD

4. Select (only key ideas)

You cannot remember everything; therefore, you must select, on the basis of your purpose, the most important points.

Select the key ideas for each of the selections. The first selection has purposes given. Create your own purposes for the second and third selections; use the headings, and key sentences. Underline the ideas you select.

Purposes for Selection One:

1. Determine where dream images come from.
2. Discover the various theories about the functions of dreams.
3. Learn Freud's ideas about dreams.

Selection One

To Dream

I drew with my finger, moistened by saliva, a wet cross on the palm of my left hand, with the intention of seeing whether it would still be there on waking up. Then I dreamed that I woke up and felt the wet cross on my left hand by applying the palm to my cheek. And then a long time afterwards I woke up, really, and knew at once that the hand of my physical body had been lying in a closed position undisturbed on my chest all the while.

What do you dream about? The contents of dreams vary. In recent years dreams have been studied by psychologists in laboratories by waking people up during REM sleep. One study found that the most frequent themes of college students' dreams were falling, being attacked or chased, trying repeatedly to do something, schools, teachers, studying, and sexual experiences. Dreams usually concern two or three people and familiar objects (e.g., your house or car).

Where do these dream images actually come from? A great many can be traced to your recent daily activities. Images can also come from early memories that have been revived by an image in your dream. Imagery of what is actually happening to you while you are sleeping, such as change in room temperature, may be incorporated into your dream. Finally, dream images are often derived from your physiological state. Pregnant women often have dreams concerning their babies.

People are generally puzzled by their dreams, and many theories have tried to explain the functions of dreams. Early theorists felt that dreams helped to eliminate mental tensions that had built up

during the day. Freud stated that the purpose of dreaming is to satisfy a wish. He felt that dreams guard your sleep: They enable you to carry out impulses, unfulfilled during the day that might have disturbed your sleep.

Freud argued that dreams have two levels of meaning. The surface meaning, which Freud called the *manifest content*, consists of the dream images themselves as they are directly experienced. The true meaning, which Freud called the *latent content*, consists of hidden wishes and impulses that underlie the actual dream images. For example, a desire for sexual intercourse (latent content) may be expressed symbolically as a dream of a train entering a tunnel (manifest content).

Carl Jung is believed to have analyzed over 100,000 dreams. He felt that you dream about things that you are lacking in your waking life. His theory of dreams incorporates aspects of mysticism and religion.

Another common theory of dreams states that their function is simply that of problem solving. Dreaming may be a continuation of thinking about your daily problems. A dream may show you how to deal with your needs and wishes.

M. Holland, Using Psychology

Did you find yourself remembering information easier because you had a purpose to your reading; you were looking to gain specific pieces of knowledge. For the second selection, scan the headings and selection and write down 3-4 main ideas you are looking for while you read. Once you begin reading, underline the information that fulfills your purposes.

State your purposes before you select the ideas. (You may write them as questions.)

Selection Two

Self-Esteem

Understanding Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is perhaps the most important part of our self-concept. More specifically it is the degree to which we value ourselves or the degree to which we feel worthwhile. Psychological development throughout life is greatly affected by this self judgment. In fact, it is probably the single most important factor that determines our feelings, attitudes, values, behaviors, and goals (Branden, 1969). Canfield and Wells (1975) believe that the enhancement and preservation of our self-esteem is perhaps our highest value.

Abraham Maslow (1970) writes that all people in our society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for stable, firmly based, usually high evaluation of themselves-in other words, for self-respect and self-esteem, as well as for the esteem of others. These needs may be classified into two subsidiary sets. The first (self-respect and self-esteem) is the desire for strength, achievement, adequacy, mastery and competence, confidence in the face of the world, independence, and freedom. The second (the esteem of others) is what we call the desire for reputation or prestige (defining it as respect or esteem from other people), status, fame and glory, dominance, recognition, attention, importance, dignity, or appreciation. This need requires feedback from others to assure that we are highly regarded and appreciated. As our self-esteem needs are satisfied we begin to realize that our lives have meaning and we begin to feel more useful and better able to make choices for ourselves and to direct our own lives (O'Connell and O'Connell, 1974)

Identifying Levels of Self-Esteem

The best indicator of the level of self-esteem that you possess at any given time is the way you are behaving. Behavior is acting out of basic attitudes (beliefs) that we hold and of feelings we are experiencing. In turn, our behavior reinforces our attitudes and affects the way that we view ourselves and hence, the way that we feel. It also greatly affects our relationships with others. In fact, others are often more aware of our behavior than we are; consequently, we can learn a great deal about ourselves by viewing our own behavior from their perspectives.

Characteristics of People with Low Self-Esteem

First, people who experience low esteem have very little self-respect. Insistence on putting themselves down demonstrates this lack of self-respect. We hear these people say, “I can never do anything right,” or “I will probably mess it up again just like I always do everything else,” or “I’m stupid,” or “I’m not good,” and on and on. These frequent devaluations do nothing to enhance these individuals’ self-respect and may drive away the very thing they want most of all, to have people as friends.

These individuals also frequently blame others for their condition, which leads us to a second behavioral problem: they often behave irresponsibly. In other words, they do not see themselves as being responsible for their actions. This irresponsible behavior is exhibited by being late for appointments, yet invariably blaming someone else or something else for their tardiness, or by seldom following through on tasks that they agree to do. If they do finish a task, they seem to arrange for failure by making sure that it is poorly done; this further verifies their beliefs that they can never do anything well. These beliefs become a self-fulfilling prophecy, severely limiting their future achievements and further supporting the negative views they hold about themselves. Robert Merton (1957) defines self-fulfilling prophecy as a “false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true”. Doing surprisingly well at something because others are supportive and you believe you can do it is an example of positive self-fulfilling prophecy.

Third, they often appear to be guarded and withdrawn. When their friends try to be helpful by offering praise or constructive criticism, they behave in a defensive manner by negating the feedback or aggressively attacking the people who offer the help. These attacks may be projections directed at behaviors in the other people that they also dislike in themselves. They will say, “Well, you are that way too,” or “You’re not perfect either.” They see others’ attempts to help as ego threatening. Hence, they not only reject themselves, they often reject others.

Fourth, people with low self-esteem are often unable or unwilling to be open with others regarding important personal information about themselves. Sidney Jourard (1974) refers to the process of letting oneself be known to others as self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is one means by which the healthy personality is both achieved and maintained (Jourard, 1964), but only if the self-disclosure meets the condition of authenticity. The term *authenticity* is used by Jourard (1968) to mean that one self-discloses honestly. People with low self-esteem, if they self-disclose at all, tend to say things about themselves that they do not mean. Their disclosures seem to have been chosen more for cosmetic value than for truth.

The consequence of a lifetime of lying about themselves to others is the loss of contact with their real selves—what Karen Horney (1950) refers to as self-alienation. She describes self-alienated people as lacking in (a) the ability to recognize themselves as they really are, without minimizing or exaggerating, (b) the ability or willingness to accept the consequences of their actions and decisions, and (c) the ability or willingness to realize it is up to them to do something about their difficulties. This is a further indication of their irresponsible behavior; they do not see themselves as directing their own lives.

-V. Napoli, *Adjustment and Growth in a Changing World*

5. Organize

You will remember ideas more easily if you see the relationship between them. For example, the following list of 11 ideas would be difficult to remember if left as a list. No relationship between the items is readily apparent and the list is too long.

- The id is the power system of the personality, providing energy.
- The id operates on the pleasure principle.
- The id cannot tolerate tension and seeks immediate relief.
- Pleasure principle produces primary process thinking...logic and reasonableness do not hold.
- A dream is an example of the primary process thinking.
- The ego is the strategist of the personality.
- It moves to satisfy the desires of the id in a realistic manner.
- Type of thought involved is called secondary process—rational, logical, purposeful, and critical.
- The ego is only concerned with what a person can do.
- The id makes the decisions about what the person wants; the ego does its best to get it.
- The ego has no morals.

Now look at these same ideas organized into smaller, more meaningful groups:

I. The Id

- A. The id is the power system of personality – provides energy
- B. The id operates on the pleasure principle
 - 1. The id cannot tolerate tension and seeks immediate relief
 - 2. The pleasure principle produces primary process thinking – everyday restrictions on thought don't hold
 - a. Dreams are an example

II. The Ego

- A. The ego is the strategist – operates in realistic manner
- B. Produces secondary process thinking – rational, logical
 - 1. Only concerned with what a person can do
 - 2. Id decides what a person wants, ego decides how to get it
 - a. Ego has no morals

Your chances of remembering two groups with two to four items in each one (as in the example above) are better than your chances of remembering one group with eleven items. Groups should be kept relatively small. Four to six items seem to be the best number to form a group, and seven is the maximum. If one idea has more than seven ideas under it, it should be reorganized into two groups.

Exercise

Organize the key ideas that you *selected* in Selection One and Two. Complete these partial outlines.

Selection One – Dreams

I. Contents of dreams

- A. _____
- B. _____

II. Source of dream images

- A. _____
- B. _____
- C. _____
- D. _____

III. Functions of dreams according to theorists

A. Early theories

B. Freud

1. _____
2. Two levels of meaning to dreams
 - a. _____
 - b. _____

C. Jung

1. _____
2. _____

D. Common theory:

Selection Two

SELF-ESTEEM

I. Understanding self-esteem

A. Definition: _____

B. Importance of self-esteem

1. _____
2. _____
3. Maslow: We all have two types of need for self-esteem:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____

II. Levels of self-esteem

A. Behavior gives indication of level

B. _____

III. _____

A. Little self respect (which causes loss of friends and then more loss of self-respect).

B. _____

C. _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

D. _____

1. Lack authenticity because cannot self disclose
2. _____
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____

6. Recode

Some say that there is really no such thing as forgetting; the information was just not entered into the long term system in a format that allowed for easy retrieval. You must recode the author's words into your own. Recoding gives you short phrases expressed in terms you can understand.

Example A

1. There are many reasons why the computer has grown in value in the world of business
 - A. One reason is the fact that in only a few seconds it can accomplish what would take man several hours and even days.
 - B. Also, the computer's memory bank is so large and can store over one million items on a single tape.

Example B

1. Value of computers to business
 - A. Speed: seconds versus hours
 - B. Storage system: one million items per tape

Even though Example A is clearly organized and contains only three key sentences from an eight-sentence paragraph, it still needs to be RECODED for entry into the long term memory.

Example B, on the other hand, contains the same information as Example A, but it has been RECODED. Longer phrases have been summarized. Substituting fewer words gives you less to remember, of course, but more importantly, it demands active participation from you. You have to thoroughly understand the information before you can substitute your own words for the author's.

In the following example, several of the key ideas from the selection "Id, Ego, and Superego," which appeared previously have been RECODED. Notice how a traditional outline is not followed but the ORGANIZATION is still evident.

The id. The id is the power system of the personality, providing energy (sexual and aggressive) for the actions of the individual.

It operates on the pleasure principle, which states that all unpleasant events should be avoided, regardless of the cost.
The id cannot tolerate tension and seeks immediate relief.

In thought, the pleasure principle produces primary process thinking, in which the everyday restrictions on thought; logic and reasonableness do not hold.

The id

1. Power system provides energy

2. Operates on pleasure principle

-can't take tension
-wants fast relief

3. Produces primary thinking;
-non-logical
-non-reasonable

RECODED information must be written down. It can be written on note cards or in a notebook.

Example of Note cards

Front of Card

Id
Definition

Id
Kind of thinking it produces
(example)

Ego
Definition

Ego
Kind of thinking it produces

Superego
Definition (two parts)

Superego
How developed

Back of Card

a. The power system-gives energy
b. Operates on pleasure principle,
what person wants

Primary process thinking
example:
(bizarre dreams and
hallucinations)

a. Strategist
b. Operates on reality
c. No morals

Secondary process thinking,
rational, logical, and critical.

Two parts-where moral principles
are
a. "Good" ego ideal takes praise
b. "Bad" conscience feels guilt

Comes from parents
a. Reward or punish
b. Observe or imitate
c. Instruction with threats and
promises

7. Rehearse

Repeat it, recite it, review it, rehearse it. There is no substitute for rehearsal and little memory without it.