



The CENTER for STUDENT SUCCESS

STUDY STRATEGIES

With so much to do and so little time, how can you get through everything you need to do each week?

Recognize that your problem is less about **how few hours you have** and more about **how you actually use each hour** available to you. Many students practice “**pseudo-working**”: looking and feeling like they are working hard, but not getting much done because of a lack of focus and concentration.* This is an inefficient method that makes both studying *and* relaxation stressful. The goal is learning to use your study time efficiently in order to free you up to rest and serve throughout your week.

In his book *Deep Work*, Cal Newport describes how high-quality work (writing, studying, careful reading) requires deep concentration. This leads him to provide the following formula for success:

$$\text{High-Quality Work Produced} = \text{Time Spent} \times \text{Intensity of Focus}$$

This means (remember your algebra?) that **decreasing either your time or your focus will drop your productivity**. Your brain is not designed to pop in and out of heavy thinking; it requires significant time to get back into its groove after being distracted. Thus, **since your time is limited, your goal should be to increase your focus by finding times and spaces that minimize distractions**.

Spaces: Always be on the lookout for **new study spaces that minimize distractions**: e.g., home office, quiet room in the library, sitting outside, desk with headphones, or public library. Learn what type of environment is best for each type of work (reading vs. writing vs. studying vs. group work). Avoid places that are mentally associated with relaxation, like your bed, couch, the cafeteria, or in front of the TV. Get creative and do not be afraid to change things up when needed.

Times: Build a weekly rhythm of homework assignments, attempting to **use the same slot each week to do the same thing**. This will help transform these pieces of work into **habits**. For example, you might review your vocabulary cards every day while eating breakfast, and save Thursday afternoon for your weekly church history assignment. Again, get creative and change things up when needed. Do not forget to build in times to work ahead on your larger assignments.

Other study tips:

1. Do not attempt to do one thing for 8 hours straight! Change things up when your brain needs a break—but keep your priorities clear (see our handout on **Time Management**).
2. Take a **5-10 minute break** every hour or so. These breaks will help maximize your focus when studying.
3. **Silence your phone**. Keep it face down with the ringer off and preferably in “Do Not Disturb” mode. Cut back on what apps are worthy of push notifications. Even hearing your phone buzz will waste untold time, distracting your brain and requiring time to catch back up with your train of thought. **Train yourself in self-control**.
4. When studying for exams, simply reviewing your notes is not the most effective or time-efficient strategy. Check our **Test-Taking Strategies** handout for ideas on more effective methods.
5. Drink water, do not overload on caffeine, do not skip meals, and treat food as a source of energy rather than a source of distraction. Taking care of your body will help your brain to perform at a maximal level.

*This definition, and much of the rest of this handout, is drawn from Cal Newport’s books *How to Become a Straight-A Student* and *Deep Work*.