STUDY TIPS

Some ideas to make studying more manageable and effective.
And, some thoughts on how to get yourself going when you’re having trouble getting going.

1. Break down big jobs into specific observable steps.

Employ the SOS strategy.* SOS stands for Specific Observable Steps. Think in terms of specific, 15-minute tasks that you can picture yourself doing and completing, such as:

- “I am going to take fifteen minutes to write down a list of questions that my paper will need to address.”
- “I am going to take an inventory of all the things I can say, all the things I wish I could say but don't know if I have the evidence to support, and all of the hunches I have.”
- “I am going to take stock of what chapter, notes, materials I need to review for this exam.”

An example of a task that is not specific or observable is: “I'm going to work on my paper.” It is a goal not a task, and it doesn't describe a specific step that you can picture yourself starting, doing, and finishing.

2. Notice your own preferences and tendencies in relation to time.

To manage your time well, you need to become aware of your own patterns, preferences, and tendencies in relation to time.

- Notice when you work best (what time of day).
- Under what conditions (lighting, temperature, seating, company, sound).
- Search out the various libraries to discover one that suits you.
- Experiment to discover how your state of rest and nutrition affects your concentration (e.g., Do certain foods help you concentrate? Do others make you sleepy? What length nap is “just right” for you, leaving you refreshed but not groggy?).
- Notice whether your optimal work conditions depend upon the type of work you are doing (e.g., when is it helpful to have other people studying near you and when do you need utter solitude?).

3. Make your conflicts conscious. Become aware of your “Yes, but” voices.

To create a realistic plan for ourselves, we need to take into account not only our best intentions but also the “Yes, but” voice, the part of us that doesn't follow our own good advice. As William G. Perry, the first director of the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University, observes, when people who are smart

*The phrase "specific, observable steps" comes from Burka and Yuen, 1983.
and who know perfectly well what to do don't do it, you know you are in the presence of forces more powerful than intelligence and knowledge. What are those forces?

You might say that one such powerful force is just plain laziness. You can call it that if you like, but you might also consider that sometimes we have competing desires (“I want to do well in my studies and give them the time they need, but I also want to be spontaneous and to spend time hanging out and playing with my friends”). And sometimes we have fears about what will happen if we make the change we say we want to make.

Abigail Lipson and David Perkins, in their book BLOCK - Getting out of Your Own Way, observe that our unspoken desires and unvoiced fears have a lot of power and can lead us to resist what sounds like absolutely terrific advice. We can get a sense of what those unacknowledged desires and fears are if we play a game of “What If.”

• What if I were to get to work early on a paper and give it my all? But what if that paper got the same grade or a worse grade than if I had written it at the last minute? Would that mean that it really wasn't worth the extra work? Would that confirm that I really am the intellectual lightweight I fear myself to be? If I've been telling myself all along that I could write a great paper if only I put in the time, and then I put in the time and don't get a great grade, would that mean I don't have the potential I claim to have and that I'm just mediocre after all? Is that what I'm afraid of finding out?

In becoming aware of our "Yes, but" voice, we make our conflicts conscious. Once they are brought to the light of consciousness, we can become aware of the full range of needs and fears we are trying to respond to and begin to consider more creative and effective ways of dealing with our conflicts. Our fears and desires are at work in our lives whether we acknowledge them or not. In fact, they tend to be more powerful when they are not acknowledged and to be less compelling when they are named and known.

4. Know the difference between taking breaks and procrastination.

Don’t be afraid of breaks. Take frequent breaks. To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires well-timed breaks. Take a break before you get to the “breaking point,” that is, the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or are so frustrated that you avoid getting back to the task.

What if “my little breaks last for hours?”

• Develop a repertoire of rejuvenating activities for your breaks, such as getting something to eat or drink, talking to a friend, listening to music, going for a walk, running an errand.
• When you take a break, ask yourself what exactly you need right now (change of activity, getting out of your work space, fresh air, companionship). Planning your break, that is, knowing what you will do and how long the break will be might help to keep the break to a manageable length.
• Sometimes you really do need a long break. But, frequent, brief breaks can help to restore your concentration and renew your energy.

5. What can you do if you’re stuck and you can’t get going?

Have someone interview you. Sometimes it helps when you have to talk to someone about your studying or trying to write about and to be asked questions. It will help you discover what you know and re-direct you or confirm your direction in your studying. You could even have this person take notes to help keep track of your ideas or areas that might need more study or consideration.
6. More on being stuck…

Some people call being stuck “procrastinating.” If you allow yourself to figure out the source of the procrastination it can help. So, listen to your procrastinating self. Let it voice its hopes, fears, and questions. Procrastination often can come from perfectionism. You might hear from your procrastinating self that it is worried that whatever you do will not be good enough. Voicing those fears is often the first step to coming to terms with this aspect of yourself and freeing your energy to devote to work rather than worrying about your work.

7. Try the So/And Even So Exercise.

• Whenever you find yourself saying, “I have only twenty minutes, so I can’t do anything productive, try saying, “I have twenty minutes, and even so … I could make a phone call/jot a few notes about what I need to study or write about.”
• When you find yourself saying, “I’m sleepy, so I can’t work on this” try saying, “even so, I could brainstorm for 15 minutes about the questions I want to address in my paper.” Or “even so, I could skim this chapter to see if I can get the main idea.”

8. Work in 20-minute stretches.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or keeping with something try to work for very small stretches of time. Most of us can do anything for 20 minutes (except hold our breath). Try working for 20 minutes and taking a 10-minute break. It is much better to work for 20 minutes and get something done than to keep thinking for 5 hours that you should be working and be so daunted or scared that you get nothing done.

9. Save often by making notes.

Notes help you do something active with the material which helps you to remember and integrate the information. Notes are also a way to help you keep track of questions, ideas, and comments. Notes don’t have to be perfect in style or grammar, just as long as they make sense to you!

RESOURCES


NOTE: 12/2004. This study guide is adapted from the Bureau of Study Counsel’s “Managing Your Time” and “Notemaking” handouts, and from a draft of “Procrastination and Writing” by Sheila Reindl.