

Instructor Weekly Messages

Ten Tips For Sharp Concentration

Here's some tips to get into a state of deep concentration where work flows easily:

1) Cut Off the Noise

It may be obvious that distractions aren't helping your focus, but do you actually cut them out? I'll admit, it can be tempting to put the e-mail alerts on, turn on the IM and answer every request sent your way. But in the end it is only preventing you from concentrating.

Getting into a state of concentration can take at least fifteen minutes. If you are getting distracted every five, you can't possibly focus entirely on your work. Answer your e-mails at scheduled times. Request that people don't interrupt you when working on a big project. If you are required to answer phones and drop-in's immediately, schedule work when the office is less busy.

2) Structure Your Environment

The place you work can have an impact on your ability to focus. Try to locate yourself so you are facing potential distractions such as doors, phones or windows. This way you can take a glance to assess sounds that would otherwise break your focus.

3) Clarify Objectives

Know what your goal is clearly before you start. If you aren't sure what the end result is, the confusion will make it impossible to focus. Before I write any articles, I define the main focus of the article and get a brief mental picture of the structure. Unclear objectives often result in having to redo sections of work.

4) Divide Blobs

Big blobs of tasks that have no clear start or end point destroy focus. If you have a large project that needs work, clearly identify a path that you will use to get started working on it. If the sequence of actions isn't obvious, it will be difficult to concentrate. Taking a few minutes to plan not only your end result, but the order you will complete any steps, can save hours in wasted thinking.

5) Know the Rules

Get clear on what the guidelines are for the task ahead. What level of quality do you need? What standards do you need to follow? What constraints are there? If you are writing a program, get clear on how much commenting you need, what functions you want to use and the flexibility required. If you are writing an article, decide on the length and style.

If the rules aren't clear from the outset, you will slip out of concentration as you ponder them later.

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6) Set a Deadline

Deadlines have both advantages and disadvantages when trying to force concentration. A deadline can make it easier to forget the non-essential and [speed up](#) your working time. If you give yourself only an hour to design a logo, you will keep it simple and avoid fiddling with extravagant designs.

Time limits have disadvantages when they cause you to worry about the time you have left instead of the task itself. I recommend using a deadline when:

1. Time is limited. If you only have a day to complete work that could easily take weeks, chunking it into specific deadlines will strip away everything that isn't crucial.
2. It's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. If your task could easily expand to have new features or ideas, use a deadline to keep it under control.
3. To avoid procrastination. A tight deadline can save you if you are worried about procrastinating.

7) Break Down Roadblocks

Roadblocks occur whenever you hit a tricky problem in your work. This can happen when you run out of ideas or your focus wavers. Break down roadblocks by brainstorming or planning on a piece of paper. Writing out your thought processes can keep you focused even if you might become frustrated.

8) Isolate Yourself

Become a hermit and stay away from other people if you want to get work done. Unless your work is based on other people they will only break your focus. Create a private space and refuse to talk to anyone until your work is finished. Put a sign on your door to steer away drop-ins and don't answer your phone.

9) Healthy Body, Sharper Mind

What you put into your body affects the way you concentrate. Nobody would expect peak performance if they showed up drunk to work. But if you allow yourself to get chronic sleep deprivation, overuse stimulants like caffeine or eat dense, fatty foods your concentration will suffer. Try to cut out one of your unhealthy habits for just thirty days to see if there is a difference in your energy levels. I've found even small steps can create dramatic changes in my ability to focus.

10) Be Patient

Before I write an article, I often sit at my desk for a fifteen or twenty minutes before I put finger on the keyboard. During this time I feel a strong urge to leave or do something else. But I know that if I am patient, I'll stumble upon an idea to write about and enter a state of flow. Without a little patience, you can't take advantage of flow when it rushed through you.

If you need strong concentration I recommend periods of 90-120 minutes. Any less than that and you will waste too much time getting started before the flow can continue. More than this is possible to sustain focus, but you will probably benefit from a quick break.