

# Smart Studying Strategies




- **Consider your study space.** Which kinds of studying environments work best for you? Do you rely on the background noise of a café to concentrate? Or the silence of a library or your own room? Experiment and determine what suits you best. Whatever you choose, ensure that any space you select is well-lit, comfortable, and properly equipped.
- **Plan your schedule wisely.** Do you work best in the morning, or can you focus better after the sun sets? Schedule your studying time strategically and review more challenging material when you are most alert. **Pace yourself** and study in segments of 25-40 minutes, with short (5-minute) breaks in between. One format that is well-used is the Pomodoro method:



*Work hard and without interruptions for 25 minutes  
Break for 5  
Every third or fourth break, **reward yourself** with 20  
minutes instead of 5*

On your study breaks and before an exam, try to **do something active**—such as taking a walk—as this has been demonstrated to boost mood, memory, and brain processing speed.

- **Manage your distractions.** If you need (or are tempted) to use a computer or smartphone while studying, try an app such as SelfControl to block the internet for a set period of time.
- **Take good notes**, both in class and on your readings. Try the Cornell method (ask us for a template), and when it is time to review, you can cover up the notes section and use the cues (main ideas, key words, and questions) to jog your memory.
- Develop the discipline of **reviewing** course notes and text summaries within 24 hours after your first reading and then **regularly** throughout the term. This will help you to transfer knowledge from short-term to long-term memory and avoid cramming.
- **Speak out loud.** Rehearse course material verbally, and not just in your mind. Studies show that you are 50% more likely to remember something if you say it aloud. 
- Try the **SQ4R Method** for retaining information – Survey, Question, Read, Record, Recite, and Review. (Refer to our SQ4R tip sheet for details.)

- **Figure out what you need to focus on most.** Test yourself and narrow down areas of difficulty to determine which specific components (of a concept, lesson, or reading) require more attention. Examine course objectives and listen carefully for cues in class. What does your instructor emphasize through intonation and repetition?

- **Write it out.** Anticipate questions and practice writing out answers to them. This is especially effective if there is an essay component to your exam.



- If you listen to music to stay calm, alert and motivated, **choose the right kind of music.** Some suggestions include classical, ambient instrumental, and movie scores at a moderate volume—anything that won't keep you from focusing. Select your playlists in advance to avoid wasting time searching for music in the middle of a study session.

- **Become a teacher.** Try to explain the course concepts to someone else. This will help to solidify what you do know and reveal what you need to work on and remember still.



- **Join (or form) a study group.** If you are forming your own, delegate members to fulfill tasks (goal-setting, snack duty, etc.).

- **Use mnemonics,** memory devices that help you to recall more complex pieces of information. These can take many forms, including the following:

- **Expressions or Words**—The most well-known type of mnemonics, this involves taking the first letter of each item to be remembered, and using those letters to form a phrase or word. (E.g., Coordinating conjunctions in English can be remembered as FANBOYS—For, And, Nor, But, Or, Yet, So.)
- **Music**—Make a song or jingle to any tune you like. This type of mnemonic works especially well for long lists that need to be remembered.
- **Names**—Use the first letter of each word in a list, rearranging those letters as necessary, to make a name. (E.g., Roy G. Biv—colours Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, Violet)
- **Rhymes**—Put the information you need to remember in the form of a poem. (E.g., In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.)
- **Notes**—Try flashcards with questions on one side and answers on the other, outlines to categorize ideas, or the Cornell method noted earlier.
- **Images**—Create an unusual mental or actual image—the sillier the better—to remember important information. For example, to recall that a numismatist is a coin collector, you might picture a new mist coming in onto a beach covered in coins.



(\*Note: Information about mnemonics and examples here were borrowed largely from Dennis Congo and The Learning Center Exchange at <http://www.learningassistance.com/>.)

- **Stick to the basics.** When you are stressed and time-pressed, it's tempting to sacrifice sleep, neglect nutrition, and avoid exercise, but these tendencies will only diminish your capacity to perform well. Keep healthy habits for a healthier mind and better exam grades.

