

Causes and Remedies of Poor Concentration

According to D.L. VanBlerkom, author of *College Study Skills: Becoming a Strategic Learner*, maintaining concentration during study sessions is a challenge for many college students. External and internal distractions are two common causes of poor concentration. Examples of **external distractions** are the phone ringing, the TV blaring in the background, and even clutter in the study space. What all these have in common is that they exist outside the student; they are external. **Internal distractions**, on the other hand, occur inside the student. Some examples of internal distractions would be hunger, worry, and fatigue. To ensure the potential for maximum concentration, one must eliminate both external and internal distractions before beginning a study session.

Another common cause of poor concentration derives from the length and frequency of study sessions. Too often, students attempt to study in long uninterrupted blocks. This is called **marathon studying**, and is ineffective with regard to deep concentration, proper understanding, and long-term retention. The remedy for this is **distributed practice**, which applies the principles of the **cycle of concentration**. It has been demonstrated that dividing a two-hour study block into two fifty-minute sessions and taking a ten-minute break between those sessions allows the brain to gather more with greater ease, and retain more with greater efficiency.

Cycling between focused attention and breaks for rest and reflection result in maximized concentration. The cycle of concentration goes through three phases: **minimal concentration**, which occurs for approximately the initial five minutes when one first sits down to study and is still easily distracted; **medium concentration**, which also lasts about five minutes, starting when one's attention begins to focus more closely and can be diverted only by direct interaction, such as a phone ringing, or a personal conversation; and finally, **maximum concentration**, that period of optimal learning when the attention is highly focused and distractions are most effectively ignored. This period lasts up to 40 minutes, at which point a **ten-minute break** is needed, because concentration begins to decline. Even with the break, an entire study block should be no longer than two hours, so that the brain can most effectively process what has been studied. If concentration is interrupted at any point in the cycle, one must begin again, and go through the first two stages a second time before returning to maximum concentration. Therefore, if one is attempting to study in an environment where there are frequent distractions, efficient study may be very difficult to achieve.