Getting Started: Managing Time and Staying Focused in College with the Help of Assistive Technology

CTD Center on Technology and Disability

Assistive and Instructional Technology Supporting Learners with Disabilities

The transition from high school to higher education provides you with new opportunities. It also brings new challenges and increased expectations.

In the K-12 system you may have been well supported by your family and teachers. Going forward, your success will depend on your ability to manage all of the pieces that encompass going to college. Going to class is a big part of the experience, but a relatively small amount of time. You will need to be aware of the challenges of managing living on campus, having a social life, and possibly juggling a job. If you struggle with concentrating or managing time well, it's important to go into your first year of college with plans and strategies to adapt to the new challenges college presents.

This document will help you gain insight into how combining healthy study habits with technology can help you focus and manage your time in college. It also includes information about another critical component of educational success: Getting enough sleep, especially since your parents aren't around to ensure you get enough rest and that you wake up on time.

First Steps: Managing Time, Staying Focused, and Setting Goals

Step 1: Become familiar with the factors that influence schoolwork habits and the assistive technology (AT) that can help

Motivation: Try to attach meaning to the time spent on schoolwork. Create a list of ideas about schoolwork, and pull out the ones that are positive and motivating. Try creating study "mantras," or sayings, to motivate yourself such as, "I can do this." Also consider a simple reward of some kind, such as no social media until a goal has been met. This will help you encourage yourself to complete work in a timely manner. This may require some patience. Some disabilities that impact concentration can also affect motivation.

AT for addressing motivation:

- Distraction blocking software and apps

- Checklists to check off completed steps

- Timers for taking quick breaks between work

Create a list of thoughts about school work, and sort them into positive and motivating ones, and those that aren't so positive.

- Bluetooth headphones for study music. You can run a playlist on a phone on repeat, and put it out of reach so it isn't a distraction.

Surroundings: Where you do your schoolwork can have a major impact on your ability to focus and manage time. While your brain tries to concentrate, it will also respond to sensory information such as sound and sight. Think about sounds, sights, and people that are distracting, and pick study locations without these distractions. The campus library might have designated quiet study spaces or study carrels. Also ask peers and staff at your college's Disability Services department for recommendations for good study locations.

Your brain strongly connects surroundings with the activities done there. Studying in a dedicated place sends your brain a signal that it's time to focus on schoolwork.

AT for managing surroundings:
- Noise canceling earphones or foam earplugs
- "Ambient noise" applications that loop relaxing sounds
- Large computer screen to help block surrounding visual distractions

Distractions: It can be hard to concentrate on studies when distractions are only a website away. Electronic devices, such as smartphones, can be distracting. Minimize their presence or use during study times. It can be tricky when distracting technology is also a technology that helps.

In addition to digital distractions, your mind may also wander. Be honest and determine how often distractions occur during a typical study session. Use the tips below to help yourself focus:

AT for minimizing distractions:
- Distraction blocking software or apps
- Timers for work/break routines, such as recharging focus for 5 to 10 minutes and then working for 15 or 25 minutes
- Alarms (such as a talking clock app) which make sounds at intervals (such as every ten minutes) can cue you to refocus.
- Fidgets or alternative seating (such as a standing desk, or a large ball instead of a chair) can help decrease distractions and increase focus.
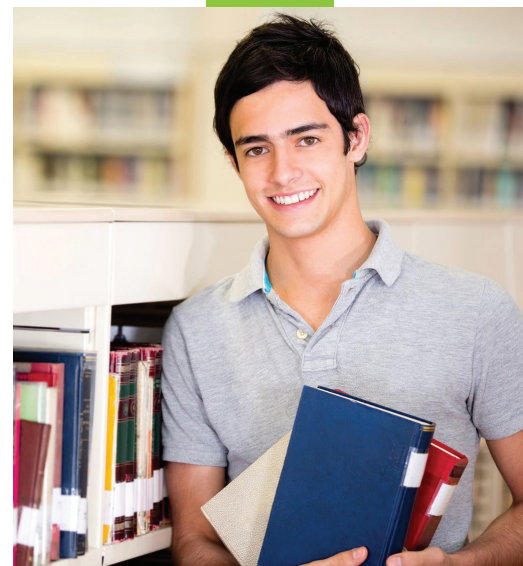
Think about sounds, sights, and people that are distracting, and pick study locations without these distractions.

- Distracting thoughts can be written on a piece of paper and put away to think about later.

Time awareness: Some disabilities may impact your awareness of time and make it hard to judge the time and effort needed to complete a task. When given an assignment, consider asking a student or the instructor how long they think it will take to complete that assignment. To make study sessions more productive, try setting time goals for different steps of an assignment (Example: It is 1:00. I want to have my thesis statement complete by 1:30.) and then set alarms at those times to stay on schedule.

AT for improving time awareness:

- A calendar to keep track of assignments and to plan your study times. Choose one or more that work for you, such as:
    - A color-coded paper calendar
    - An electronic calendar with prompts and reminders
    - A web-based calendar that you can share with others

- A visual timer to see how much time has passed or is left for a study session or a test

- A talking clock to announce the time aloud during set intervals (every five minutes) to help keep track of passing time.

Procrastination: While many college students joke about procrastinating, it can be very damaging to your college studies. Talk with someone in Student Services or Disability Services for help with how to pace your studies. Many colleges have counselors, student mentors or even support groups to help students overcome procrastination and complete their work on time.

AT for addressing procrastination:

- Reminder and planner applications that send you notifications about upcoming due dates. You can routinely check the calendar, and block out study times for upcoming assignments.

- Distraction blocking software and apps to encourage studying. Many of these tools have a "scheduling" feature, allowing you to block distractions during set times and days of the week to encourage studying during those times.

- Use a checklist to write down simple steps for starting an assignment

To make study sessions more productive, try setting time goals for different steps of an assignment.

- Use favorite computer programs to organize information about an assignment in one place.

Your needs: Images depicting students often show them working at a desk, sitting still, and diligently completing their work. The truth is that everyone completes work in his or her own way, and it's important to learn what works best for you. Consider experimenting: try with movement while working, vary time of day at which you study, take short breaks every fifteen to twenty minutes, or talk aloud when working.

Feeling rested: Even with the right strategies and supports in place, you will struggle to concentrate if your mind hasn't had enough rest. Most people need at least seven or eight hours of sleep each night. Arrange your schedules and habits to allow for more sleep.

Step 2: Set new goals for your study habits

Write your own "time management script: Understanding what improvements need to be made in order to keep a focus on school studies will help you study more efficiently. Reference the different factors listed in step one (motivation, surroundings, distractions, time awareness, needs, and rest), and write a "script" that reflects your current study and time management behaviors. Below is an example:

- **Example — Time Management Script:** While I am enjoying college, I often feel overwhelmed by starting projects, and I waste a lot of time trying to get started. After most of my classes, I spend time exploring the campus and hanging out, two things that are important to me, but distract me from how much work I have to do. I tend to start homework much later than some of my peers, beginning around 10:00 p.m. most nights. Staying up late studying leaves me feeling exhausted in class.

  The thought of starting work sometimes makes me feel nervous or overwhelmed, so I distract myself or tell myself I will do "one more thing before I start." That frequently becomes hours of distractions. Often an upcoming deadline is the only thing that helps me to push through my studies. I find myself working right up to deadlines.

  I've learned that I do my best work in a group, as my friends usually set better schedules than me, and working with them is a great way to help keep on task and engaged. On a few occasions, I have found that it helps

To help study more efficiently, it helps to understand what improvements need to be made in order to keep a focus on school studies.

to leave my technology (phone included) at my dorm and complete my work at a library computer station.

Identify the areas you want to improve: Look over your script, and highlight one or two habits you want to improve or change immediately. In another color, highlight one or two good habits you want to use more often.

Next Steps: Take Advantage of the School's Resources and Explore How Technology Can Help

Step 3: Explore what options are available on campus to help with developing or improving study habits

- Check with the college Disability Services office to learn about any available services or accommodations to help with focus and developing healthy study habits. Reference the script you wrote in Step 2, or your IEP or 504 Plan from high school, so they have a good understanding of what support you need. Some schools have student mentors or support groups to help students with disabilities improve their study habits.

- Ask the school's Student Services about available programs to help with study habits and navigating college life. Many schools have dedicated study halls where students can study together or receive advice and support from staff.

- If stress is interfering with your schoolwork, take advantage of supports offered by your college's health services department. Supports such as stress reduction and management strategies from knowledgeable professionals, and support from fellow students, can go a long way in helping to improve study habits.

Step 4: Seek out assistive technology resources

- Ask the school's Disability Services if there are any staff or services to help identify appropriate assistive technology to improve study habits.

- Consult with any of the staff or support groups listed in Step three to learn about technology for students who struggle with attention, focus, and time management.

Check with the college's disability services office about any available services or accommodations that can help with developing healthy study habits.

- Many states have dedicated assistive technology resource centers that will lend assistive technology to you and connect you with knowledgeable experts. Visit ataporg.org/states.html to find an assistive technology center in your state.

- Consult the accompanying document "Tips and Technology for Managing Time, Focus, and Sleep in College" for more examples of different technology supports and strategies.

Next Steps: Experiment with New Strategies and Tools

Step 5: Create practical plans for using new strategies and technology tools

After exploring your college's services and technology options, it's time to start forming habits to incorporate these supports. The following suggestions can help you make progress with new study strategies and tools.

- Before starting a new week, create a realistic list of new strategies to try, such as a new student study hall service. Pick an assignment, plan several days and times to work on it in this location. You might try a distraction-blocking app. Planning and preparing these strategies and tools makes using them much easier than trying to improvise something in the moment.

- Set study goals or priorities for the week. During a busy school week, prioritize what to do and where to start. Whether using a calendar or a to-do list, writing down goals can help make the most of study time. Putting in the time up front to develop a realistic plan for the week can help you manage your workload.

- Recognize when old habits return. Create an "if this, then that" list: "If I am falling into *this* habit, or feeling *this* way, then I can do _____" as a way of encouraging good habits that work. Consider keeping this list some place accessible such as on your phone. Even when you have a good plan, it is easy to fall back into old study habits. Be proud of the new self-awareness you are developing. Reflect on what is working, and recommit to using the tools and strategies that are helping.

Many states have dedicated assistive technology resource centers that will lend assistive technology to you.

Step 6: Develop healthy sleep habits to get the right amount of rest.

Even with the right assistive technology and strategies in place, it's hard for your brain to do the work it needs when it hasn't had enough rest. Concentration is heavily influenced by the quantity and quality of nightly sleep. The strategies listed below may help with getting enough sleep so you can do your best.

- Your body needs a minimum of seven to eight hours of sleep each night

- Falling asleep and waking up the same time each day makes it easier to get the right amount of rest.

- Nap wisely: 20 to 30 minute naps are a great way to feel rested during the day. Napping any longer, however, can interfere with night time sleeping.

- Consider developing a pre-sleep schedule at the end of the day. Establishing a 30 minute routine that is free of over-stimulating activities and electronics helps you wind down and transition into a restful sleep.

- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants close to bedtime.

- Prior to bed, write a list of concerns or thoughts that might stay on your mind and keep you awake. Put it out of your mind and deal with it tomorrow.

- Consider wearing a fitness bracelet that tracks sleep. Having concrete data about sleep habits can help you achieve healthier sleeping habits.

Example

Sara is very excited to start her first semester at college and take steps toward a rewarding career in graphic design. She knows that her autism gives her great strengths: she is creative and detail oriented. Sometimes, though, her autism can make it hard to focus, and it can get in the way of her being as productive as she'd like to be. Determined to have a successful college experience, Sara asked some of her trusted family members and friends to help her create a plan to manage her time and focus during her first semester at college.

Sara sought to discover what she routinely does that leads her to cram too much work into too little time. Her parents mention that she's always had a hard time getting started on homework,

Whether using a calendar or a to-do list, writing down goals can help make the most of study time.

and she's struggled with motivation when the work doesn't hold her interest.

Thinking about this, Sara realized that she likes having a step-by-step list of how to get started on a project. She now plans to either write this list herself, or work with college staff or a study partner to create this list for most of her study sessions. In thinking creatively about how to motivate herself to complete schoolwork that she doesn't find interesting, Sara came up with the idea to write down something meaningful from each assignment, such as "This assignment on the history of graphic art software might not be fun to write, but it will help me appreciate how far the field has come and give me knowledge that may be helpful in the future."

She's also discovered that using a favorite activity, such as updating her design blog, as a reward for completing schoolwork, is a great way to motivate her to complete assignments.

Now that she knows where she needs improvement, Sara checked in with the Disability Services office and Student Services office to learn what helpful services they offer. She discovered that there are study hall rooms set up specifically for students in design programs, and she found tutors there could help her break big projects into manageable study sessions. Working with the Disability Services office, Sara learned about distraction blocking software for her phone and computer. She also learned how to advocate for herself, and was encouraged to find out that if she talks with her instructor, she can often get help clarifying information for an assignment, or negotiate extending a deadline for certain types of assignments.

With a better understanding of her focus and time management strengths paired with an effective support network of technology and services, Sara feels confident that she can rise to the occasion and complete her school work on time during her first semester.

Having concrete data about sleep habits can help motivate you toward healthier sleeping habits.

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