**Where and When You Study: Choosing Your Best Place**

*Your surroundings have a big effect on your efficiency. Match your* [*assessment results*](http://web.mit.edu/uaap/learning/teach/assess.html) *to the advice below. What changes do you need to make?*

**Where?**

1.  Is my study place **available** to me whenever I need it?

* Your study place does you little good if you cannot use it when you need it.
* If you are using a shared study place, work out a schedule so that you know when you can use it without distractions and as long as you need it.

2.  Is my study place **free from interruptions and distractions?**

* It is important to have uninterrupted study time. Even one hour of study without distraction is more effective than four hours of study with interruptions.
* Turn off your cell phone or set it to silent. No ring tones + no vibrations = no distractions.
* Turn off the IM feature on your computer, unless you are using it as a means to communicate with members of a study group.
* Don't check your email while studying. Set aside time to read it before you start studying or once you have finished.
* A great way to take care of distractions is to create several user profiles on your computer. Set one, perhaps called Study, to block access to the internet altogether. Set another to Research, allowing internet access but blocking games and perhaps email. The third, with full access, can be My Time or something similar. [A warm shout-out to the brothers of [Alpha Delta Phi](http://adp.mit.edu/) for this suggestion.]

3.  Does my study place **have all the materials I need?**

* Be certain that your study place includes reference sources and all of the supplies you generally need (e.g., graph paper, pens/pencils, rulers, calculator, a computer with internet access).
* If you study best outside your room, check your backpack or bag before heading for the library or Athena cluster to make sure you have everything you'll need.

4.  Does my study place have **a large enough desk/table?**

* Use a desk or table large enough to spread out everything you need, so that you don't waste time moving things around.
* Allow enough room for writing.
* Try to avoid clutter.

5.  Does my study place have **a comfortable chair?**

* A chair that makes you stiff or fidget will interfere with your studying.
* A chair that is too comfortable might make you sleepy.
* Find a chair in which you can sit for at least an hour and still maintain your attention. Then take a stretch break.

6.  Does my study place have **enough light?**

* Straining to see the page or screen burns through your energy more quickly.
* If you have a dark room or study place, add a lamp or use a reading light.

7.  Does my study place have **a comfortable temperature?**

* If it's too warm, you might become sleepy.
* If it's too cold, you may become distracted.
* Select a temperature at which your mind and body function best.

**When to Study**

**Make studying a regular part of your schedule.**  Let it become routine like brushing your teeth or tying your shoes. For example, once your class times are set, find times when you have a two-hour block, say 2-4 pm on Tuesday/Thursday and 8:30-10:30 pm Monday/Wednesday. Do not ever schedule something else at those times: make them sacred!

Choose study times and days **when you're likely to feel energetic** and have enough time to complete assignments before class.

**Use daylight hours** (as much as possible). Research shows that 60 minutes of study during the day is the equivalent of 90 minutes of study at night (Walter Pauk, *How to Study in College,* 6th ed. [Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1989], p. 27).

**Plan to study for blocks of time.** Generally, studying in one-hour blocks is most effective (50 minutes of study with a ten-minute break). Shorter periods can be fine for studying notes and memorizing materials, but longer periods are needed for problem-solving tasks, quizzes, and writing papers.

**Determine how long you need to study** to fully engage with the material you are learning. The third unit number in [MIT subject listings](http://student.mit.edu/catalog/index.cgi) tells you how many hours departments and instructors feel you need to spend studying in order to effectively learn that subject: 1 unit = 1 hour of work per week. Most subjects expect 6-9 units of preparation, and many students find they need more. You do the math!

**Study soon after lecture.** You'll remember and understand more if you review your lecture notes immediately after class. If questions arise then or something is unclear, you'll have plenty of time to check with a classmate or the instructor to clarify what you missed; it may be something important that you need for your quizzes and might appear on an exam.

**List and do tasks according to priorities.** Remember Parkinson's Law: "[Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parkinson%27s_Law)” If you allot two hours to read ten pages, it will probably take you the full two hours to complete this 30-minute task.

**Start long or involved assignments ahead of time.** In your heart you know it's true: cramming and rushing = poor quality work.

**Set an agenda for each study period.** Be specific, and plan ahead so that you know exactly what task you will accomplish during each study period.

Once you find a schedule that works for you, **stick to it.** Some days you may not feel like studying at the appointed time, but habit will help you settle down.

**Adjust to Your Learning Styles**

In the [Assessment](http://web.mit.edu/uaap/learning/teach/assess.html) section you identified your primary and secondary learning styles. Now filter your study techniques through that knowledge. For example, if you are mostly a visual learner, drawing pictures and diagrams will help you retain information better. If you learn best while in motion, walk around while you read your textbook or create a dance step linked to elements in a formula.

**Reading Effectively**

Don't try to tackle assigned readings in textbooks or online as you would a novel or Facebook post. Instead, take the following approach to each chapter or individual reading assignment:

* **Read the Introduction and the Summary.** Consider this a preview of the topics you will encounter. They also provide an overview of what you are expected to understand by chapter's end.
* **Ask questions** about the reading and try to answer them as you go along. Turn the topics mentioned in the Introduction into questions and refer to them as you go along.
  + **Tip:** Jot these questions down in the margins of the book, in a notebook you keep on readings, a file on your computer, or on stickies placed in appropriate sections within the chapter so they are handy as references. You should find the answers as you progress through the reading. If not, read the section again looking for what you missed. If you have difficulty understanding anything from the reading, be sure to make a note of it and ask for clarification during lecture or recitation.
* **Look for visual clues.** Bold print, underlining, bullets, font size, color, and type placement are often used to draw your attention to key principles and concepts. Illustrations, charts, diagrams, and their captions are equally important. For example, Biology textbooks tend to be illustrated colorfully; the photos and diagrams often can clarify concepts better than the text itself.
* **Recall and Recite.** After each section of required reading (following the steps above), stop for a minute. Close the textbook and do not look at your notes. Ask yourself the questions you created after reading the preview. If you cannot answer them correctly or completely, reread the section and try again.
* **Review.** Reread the introduction and summary sections. Do your questions, and, most importantly, the answers come immediately to mind? They should. If they don't, review the section again and consider taking more complete notes.

**Listening Well and Taking Effective Lecture Notes**

Most people retain only a small fraction of what they hear. Good notes can increase that fraction significantly. Use the tips below to improve your listening skills and your note-taking skills.

**Before Lecture**

**Prepare:**   
Readings plant seeds in your mind that will be watered and cultivated in lecture. Be sure to complete required readings **before** lecture. If you haven't done the reading, you will scramble to keep up with the unfamiliar information coming at you, and remember even less of it than otherwise. You will also find it harder to take effective notes because you won't know where the lecture is headed.

**Arrive:**Arrive early and take a seat in the center of a row and up front near the lecturer, where you can see the board and slides and hear the lecture clearly.

**Attend:**Skipping lecture is not an option. Do not rely solely on your classmates' notes or online lecture notes. Individuals tend to take notes on different things and in different ways. Learning depends on repetition: reading before lecture, hearing the material analyzed during lecture, reviewing your notes, then working on online activities—each of these reinforces the others. Besides, you are paying the professors to teach you. Why skip out on their lectures?

**During Lecture**

**Less is More:**  
Do not attempt to write down the lecturer's words verbatim. Try to get down as much of the relevant information as possible using the fewest possible words. Save writing time by using personal abbreviations and symbols that you will remember.  Develop a system that works for you.   
  
If you have trouble taking notes, consider recording the lecture, if the instructor allows this; not all do. Many lectures are available for review on [MIT OpenCourseWare](http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/home/home/index.htm).

**Listen for Signal Words and Phrases:**  
  
Signal words and phrases can help you pinpoint when key ideas and formulas are going to be introduced.

Some common signal words and phrases include:

* ‘There are 3 reasons why…” or “First…Second…Third…”
* “And most important…” or “It is worthwhile to note”
* “A major development…” or “A key concept…”

Some common signals for supporting material include:

* “On the other hand…”
* “On the contrary…”
* “For example…”
* “Similarly…”
* “In contrast…”
* “Furthermore…”

**After Lecture**

**Review:**Review your notes as quickly as possible after class when the material is still fresh in your mind. If possible, schedule time for this when planning your time (see [Constructing a Balanced Schedule](http://web.mit.edu/uaap/learning/teach/time/balance.html)); otherwise, even five minutes before the next class starts will help.

If you have terrible handwriting, consider typing your notes. Either type them directly into your computer in class or type them up from your handwritten notes after class. Don't type notes if your handwritten notes are clear, unless this helps you review the concepts presented.

**Revision:**Regardless of how you took your notes, be sure to spend time touching them up, filling in blanks, clarifying abbreviations, and making note of any questions that come up as you review them.

If anything from your notes is unclear or you have remaining questions from lecture or your readings, jot them down and have them ready to discuss with your Tutor (or TA in recitation).