



Drew University Writing Instructor Guidelines: Tutoring Students with short attention spans



A. As the tutor, be a facilitator

- Ask the student how he or she learns best. (What strategies has he or she developed to help maintain focus, attention, interest, and ability to memorize details? Ask students to describe a typical study period and what happens when they lose focus.)
- Remember that emotions are an important part of learning--ask students what makes them frustrated and what they would most like to "master," and work on these things. Emphasize their progress to help them gain confidence and monitor themselves.
- Help students break assignments and projects into small manageable parts . This helps them to feel less overwhelmed (which can lead to avoidance--often called procrastination).
- Set clear limits for each session and provide a clear structure ("first we'll work on this, then we'll do this, and finally, we'll review what we've done--how does that sound?"). Then stick to that structure unless the student asks to work on something else. Repeat directions and remind the student of the structure you have agreed on ("okay, so we've reviewed the assignment, now we're going to discuss some strategies for free writing...").
- If the student's attention wanders, change your focus, make a joke, or just touch his or her shoulder. Humor is a great asset, but maintain a balance between being strict and relaxed. If the student has clearly lost focus, ask him or her to review what you have done so far. Then restate the structure of the session, and move along with it. The more you notice whether students are paying attention, the more connected they will feel and the less their attention will wander (the same applies to yawning).

B. Help students be managers of learning

- Encourage the student to develop a work schedule that he or she will be able to stick to. Schedules are part of the prewriting-writing-rewriting process and everyone needs to learn how long they can spend on each task without ceasing to be productive.

- At the end of each session or segment of the session, review what you have done. Better yet, ask the student to review it and remind the student of anything he or she has not included.
- Try to think of mnemonic devices or "tricks" to help students memorize new rules. Once the student gets used to the idea, you can work together or making up mnemonics for each new rule, strategy, or process.
- Teach students how to outline ideas and papers--no matter how short. Organization is crucial.
- Aim for quality not quantity of work--and remember to praise all advances, no matter how small. A little positive reinforcement goes a long way.

C. *Common areas of difficulty*

1. Organization and planning
2. Preparation
3. Memory
4. Concentration
5. "Illogical" rules (try to explain why as well as what)
6. Self confidence
7. Self confidence
8. Frustration
9. Self observation and evaluation
10. Self confidence!

Sandra Jamieson. 1997.

Adapted from *Answers to Distraction* E.D. Hallowell & J. Ratey. (Pantheon, 1994)

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