

INDEX – ADVANCED STUDY SKILLS LECTURE

Section 1: A Guide to Failing the VCE

Section 2: Stress

Causes of Stress
The Physiology of Stress
How Does Stress Affect Brain Function?
Managing Stress
Stress and the VCE

Section 3: The 7 Secrets to VCE Success

Key Strategy 1: Get Ahead and Stay Ahead

Key Strategy 2: Use Time Wisely

Time Management
Where Does Time Go?
Why Do People Waste so Much Time?
Steps to Effective Time Management

Long Term Vision
Effective Planning
Prioritise Tasks – The Eisenhower Matrix
Chip Away at the Larger Tasks
Use the Available Time Wisely
Create More Time

Key Strategy 3: Use Effective (and Time-Saving) Learning Techniques

Human Memory
Committing Information to Memory
How Effective is Your Current Learning Technique?
The Most Effective Learning Technique Known to Man
Subjects/Topics that Involve Calculations
Other Learning Techniques (Ranking from Best to Worst)

Key Strategy 4: Keeping Learned Information Alive

The Curve of Forgetting
Study Smarter – Not Harder
Revision Techniques to Use Throughout the Year

Key Strategy 5: Exposure

Key Strategy 6: Manage Procrastination

- Why Do People Procrastinate?
- Common Ways Students Procrastinate
- Consequences of Procrastination
- Overcoming Procrastination
- Avoiding Perfectionism

Key Strategy 7: Optimise Brain Function

- The Circle of Success
- The Correct Mindset
- The Role of Neurotransmitters in Memory and Learning
- Optimising Brain Function During High Stress Periods

Section 4: Rankings and the ATAR – Important Facts to be Aware of

MANAGING STRESS



1. Use effective and time-saving study/learning techniques.
2. Take advantage of every opportunity to chip away at your studies.
3. Get ahead and stay ahead.
4. Complete assessment tasks and assignments **AS YOU GET THEM**. Do not leave tasks to the last minute as there are probably more around the corner!

As assessments often come at once, the procrastinator will end up with little sleep and completing work to a lower standard than otherwise possible.

5. Commence preparations for the exams well in advance so that you can complete the bulk of your learning under low stress conditions. Note that stress impairs how much information can be input into the brain, which means that it will take you longer to commit information to memory.
6. Take regular breaks while you study.
7. Do things that you enjoy and set aside time for yourself.
8. Exercise on a regular basis.

Our sedentary lifestyles do not allow us to work out stress.

Exercise produces chemicals known as endorphins – drugs that have a tranquilising effect – which is good for you in small doses.

Exercise also produces chemicals that are needed for effective brain function (neurotransmitter production).

9. Get plenty of sleep.

In general, insufficient sleep results in:

- Lower grades
- Slower learning rates
- More mistakes
- More day time sleepiness
- Mood imbalances

Most teenagers require 9.25 hours of sleep each day to meet the demands of development and learning. If students are unable to get this amount of sleep each day:

- Aim for at least 9 hours per night during high stress periods and when preparing for tests and exams.
- Get at least 7.5 hours per night when stress levels and study loads are manageable.

10. Adopt a well-balanced diet.

11. Talk out your concerns and work out anger.

12. Have a set of well-defined and realistic goals.

13. Think positively and embrace set-backs and failures as opportunities.

14. Accept the fact that you will have to do things that you do not enjoy.

15. Accept the fact that life will present many unexpected incidents and that you will need to change plans and approaches throughout your entire life!

16. Laugh and have some fun. VCE is **NOT** the end of the world.

Activity - Stress

Identify the things that are worrying you or causing stress.

Why are these factors causing you stress?

How is stressing going to help improve the situation?

Could stressing make the situation worse? In what ways?

Is there any point in stressing?

What are the possible solutions?

How can you avoid these stresses in the future?



ACTIVITY

Are there any shortcuts I can take to help free up my time?



STEP 4: CHIP AWAY AT THE LARGER TASKS

- Commence formal preparations for the exams well in advance so that you can complete the bulk of your learning under low stress conditions. High stress decreases the amount of information that can be input into the brain, which means that it will take you longer to learn a given amount of information.
- Regularly revise materials throughout the year rather than re-learning in the weeks leading up to the examinations. It is less time consuming to spend short periods reviewing materials while they're fresh in mind, rather than re-learning materials "from scratch" before the examinations.

Time Spent Per Term in One Subject	Typical Student	Smart Student
<i>Time Spent in Class (Hrs) + Homework (Difficult or New Materials)</i>		
<i>Time Spent Revising (Hrs)</i>		
<i>Time Spent Re-learning Before Exams (Hrs)</i>		
<i>Total Investment (Hrs) – 1 Subject</i>		
<i>Time Saved (Hrs) – 1 Subject</i>		
Time Saved (Hrs) – All Subjects – 1 Term		
Time Saved (Hrs) – All Subjects – Pre Exams		

- Save considerable amounts of time by:

Filling in your notes with the examples and facts that you didn't have time to take down in class during breaks or once you get home.

Writing up study notes and summaries within 24 hours of covering topics at school or **AFTER** you've revised materials before a test or exam. Don't leave this task to the weeks leading up to the exams as it will take significantly longer than if you were to complete this task when your recall ability was higher, and under less stressful conditions (the better you know your work, the less time it will take to write up notes and summaries).

- Don't leave the task of collecting past examination papers until the weeks leading up to the exams. Collect as many examination papers and resources while demands on your time are low and when there are no queues at the photocopiers at school.
- Circle difficult, challenging or tricky questions as you come across them and highlight sections of work that you found difficult. This will save you valuable time when trying to prioritise which materials need to be addressed in the lead up to the exams.
- Use waiting times, travelling times, free periods and breaks to learn or revise materials.

STEP 5: USE THE AVAILABLE TIME WISELY

- Don't spend excessive amounts of time trying to master a concept or answer a question. Mark these sections and ask your teacher or a friend for assistance when you get to school. You'll decrease stress levels, cut down on study time and develop a more confident attitude towards your studies.
- Many students engage in little or no study across January, February, June and July of each year. These periods, are, however, the ideal time to get ahead and make a significant difference to stress levels and study loads later in the year. We therefore recommend that students dedicate as much of their school holidays for study related purposes. Suggestions include:

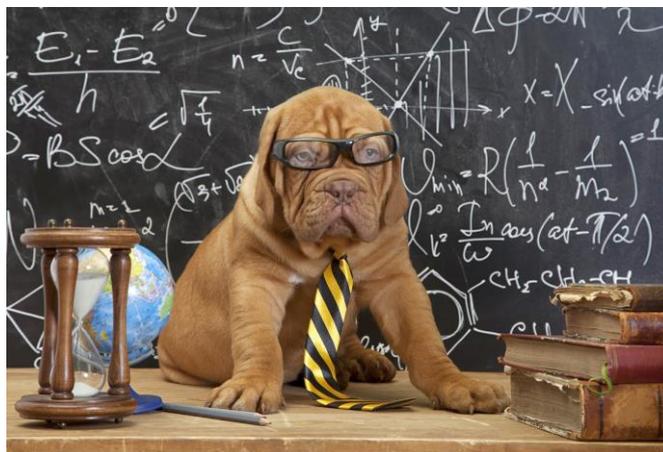
Revise examinable materials;

Work through topics ahead of school;

Compile thorough summary notes for the next test or exam; and

Read (or re-read) your English texts.

USE CLASSROOM TIME WISELY



- Students spend the greater majority of their learning time at school and should be maximising these opportunities so as to cut down on after school study commitments. Use the time spent at school wisely. The more you learn and/or complete at school, the less work that you will need to complete at home!

Here are some suggestions regarding how you can maximise the learning you do at school:

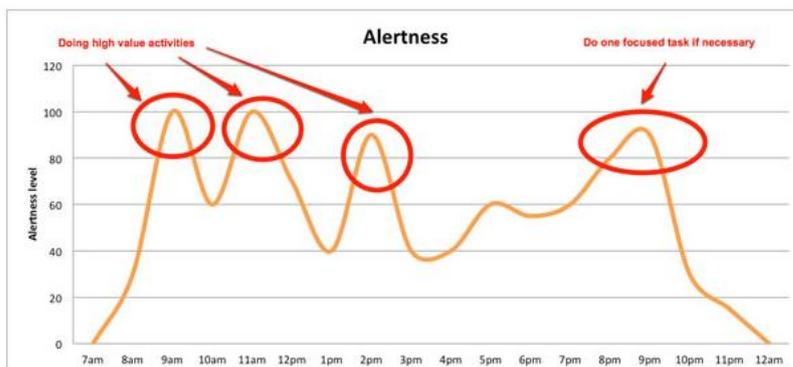
- If you have trouble concentrating in class, sit at the front so that you are removed from as many distractions as possible.
- Listen to your teachers very carefully. Stay focused and pay attention at all times. Do **NOT** day dream. Remind yourself that if you don't pay attention now, you'll need to spend at least 5 times the amount of time to cover the same amount of work on your own.
- Listen when other students ask questions – someone may just bring up a concept or fact that you're having difficulty with.

- Don't tune out even when you think that you know the materials being addressed. You may just learn something new, pick up some new examination strategies, and at worst, you will have reviewed and further consolidated the information being covered into your long term memory. And this means that you will have less study and revision to complete in the lead up to tests and examinations.
- Minimise the number of notes you write while the teacher is delivering their class. Students who divide their attention between listening, watching, comprehending and writing notes will only remember about 5% of what was presented 72 hours later – as opposed to 50% if they didn't write at the same time. You're also likely to miss vital concepts, resulting in additional study requirements outside school hours.
- Try to keep ahead of the classroom with respect to the material being covered at school. Know what topic is to be covered during the next class and read through the relevant chapter in your text book. You may even like to attempt some of the exercises in advance (you'll have to complete the exercises eventually – so it won't hurt if you try a few problems before they're assigned for homework). If you take the time to peruse your textbook, you'll become aware of what notes may need to be written down as a teacher delivers their class. You'll probably find that the majority of what he/she relays in class is already in your text book! This strategy will enable you to concentrate and pay more attention in class, improving knowledge and understanding of course materials, decreasing out of school study commitments and dramatically improving VCE marks!



LEVERAGING YOUR CONCENTRATION CYCLE

- Identify your power hours. If you usually wake up at 6am:
 - Teenage concentration levels are at their lowest in the morning with peak alertness occurring between 8am to 1pm. Students undertaking very early morning studies report being less alert, wearier, and having to expend greater effort whilst studying.
 - Concentration levels begin to decrease from about 1pm, reaching half of the maximum value by 3pm. During this period, learning can still occur, but it does require more effort.
 - Most teenagers experience a drop in energy and feel drowsy somewhere between 2pm and 4pm. This is a great time to take a 15 to 30-minute nap – not only will you feel more alert and focused on waking, you'll be replenishing your levels of brain chemicals (neurotransmitters) that play a critical role in memory and learning.
 - Following the mid-day slump, concentration levels quickly rebound to about 80-90% of the maximum value, and remain at these high levels until around 10pm.
 - The drive for sleep becomes very strong between 11pm and midnight. This means that the majority of teenagers don't fall asleep until at least 11.30pm.
- Identify which of your tasks will require high levels of focus and concentration, and which ones do not.
- Difficult or high value tasks should be addressed when concentration levels are high.



- Don't work on concentration intensive tasks when your alertness and energy levels are low. Not only will you make avoidable mistakes, tasks will require more time and effort to complete, increasing the likelihood of you becoming overwhelmed or demotivated. Use these times to eat, relax, clean, sort, research or answer emails.
- Do not fight your natural biological clock. For example:

Don't force yourself to work through an energy slump, particularly if you're in the middle of a high-concentration task. You'll waste more time plodding through that task than if you were to stop for a while and pick up a low concentration activity.

- After identifying your power hours, protect them so that you can spend them where you need it most. Don't use these periods to attend appointments, play sport, socialise, clean or sleep in. These hours should be used for tasks that require high levels of concentration or motivation.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

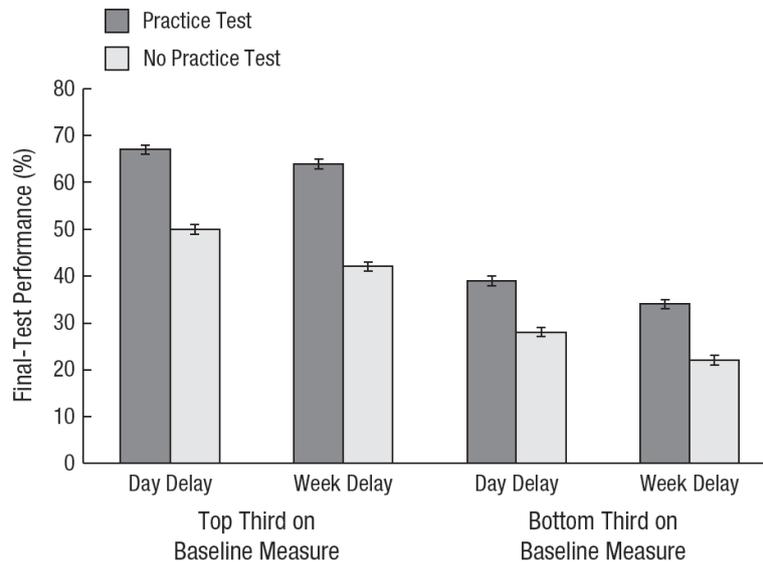
- Testosterone production and hence alertness are at their highest levels between 11am and 1pm. This is the best time to tackle tasks that require high focus and attention, such as Mathematics.
- Where possible, take a long break when concentration levels are at their lowest levels Eg. between 2pm and 3.30pm.
- Heavy meals require large amounts of energy to digest and process. Therefore, having a light, healthy lunch often helps to reduce the severity of the mid-day slump.
- If you must study during the mid-day slump, implement strategies that will increase focus and concentration. Examples include reading out loud, exposure to cold, drinking 1 – 2 glasses of water and brief spurts of exercise.
- Do some light stretching for 5 – 10 minutes after lunch to improve your circulation.

2. PRACTICE TESTING

Practice testing involves self-testing or using past exam questions while learning.

You can test yourself in the following ways:

- By asking yourself questions and answering them.
- By using flash cards.
- By doing practice questions without the aid of notes or textbook material.
- By sitting tests in a testing environment.



Mean accuracy on a final test administered 1 day or 1 week after a learning session that either did or did not include a practice test, for the top and bottom thirds of scorers on a baseline measure of ability, in Spitzer (1939). Error bars represent standard errors.

Why does testing work?

- Testing enhances retention by triggering elaborative retrieval processes by accessing your long-term memory and retrieving associated information.
- Testing facilitates the encoding process.
- Practice testing also improves the ability of students to mentally organize their knowledge, and thereby increasing the speed and efficiency of the information retrieval process.

Tips for practice testing:

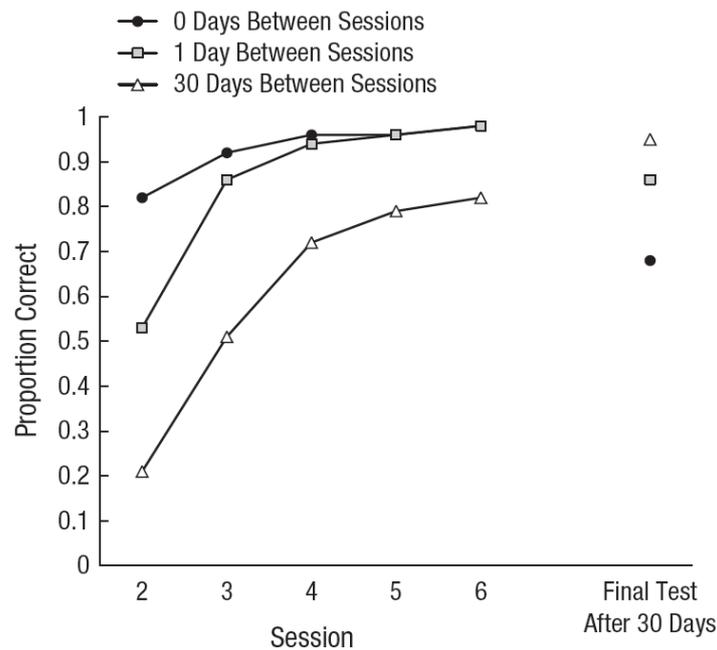
Studies show that immediate retesting without time between tests has very little benefit in increasing learning. Rather, practice testing should be done when enough time has elapsed between practice tests.

3. DISTRIBUTED PRACTICE

Distributed practice is the method of dividing your studies over time intervals rather than doing it in one large chunk.

Studies have repeatedly shown that distributed practice is better for material retention and absorption.

The reason distributed practice works is because it gives the brain time to absorb the information by switching back and forth between focused and diffused mode of thinking.



A study in 1979 showed that students who distributed 6 study sessions with an interval of 30 days between each session did the best when a test was administered 30 days after the 6th session. The students who distributed their 6 sessions with 1 day between each session did slightly worse on the final test (also given 30 days after their 6th session), but did better than the first group in all the tests given prior to the final test. And the people who did not allow a day to lapse before restudying fared the worst.

Tips for distributed practice:

When preparing for tests at school, use the 24 hour spacing interval to relearn materials. After the first four review sessions (with 24 hours between each review), your review sessions can be further spaced out and less detailed.

For the overwhelming majority of students, distributed practice combined with practice testing is enough to achieve the higher test/examination marks.

KEY STRATEGY 6: MANAGE PROCRASTINATION

Students often make up clever excuses to justify why they should put off their studies, resulting in feelings of guilt and regret when they don't get the ATAR they wanted or need.

How many of the following statements are familiar to you?

"I'll do it tomorrow."

"I'm not in the mood. I'll get more done if I wait until I'm in the mood."

"There's plenty of time to get this done – I'll do it later."

"I work better under pressure, so I'll finish this off later."

"I've got too many other things to do first."

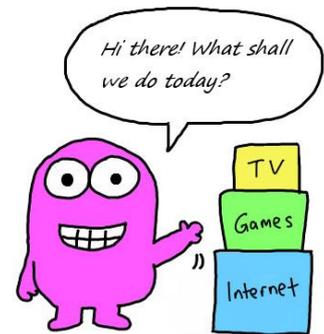
WHY DO PEOPLE PROCRASTINATE?

People usually procrastinate when they perceive tasks as being:

- Difficult
- Unpleasant
- Uncomfortable/overwhelming
- Boring
- Time-consuming
- Pointless

Some students procrastinate to avoid confronting their fear of:

- Failure
- Not meeting others' expectations
- Not meeting their own expectations
- Lacking the skills or intelligence to complete a task
- Not doing their best work
- Being poorly judged by others
- Making the wrong decision



COMMON WAYS STUDENTS PROCRASTINATE

Common ways people procrastinate include:

- Eating and sleeping.
- Keeping busy web-surfing, socialising, cleaning, planning and sorting.
- By prioritising other things, and telling themselves that "This is more important right now".

You may be doing lots of activity but making no real progress on the task at hand.

CONSEQUENCES OF PROCRASTINATION

- By constantly putting things off, there is a cumulative effect that leads to feelings of being overwhelmed with what has to be done and the **lack of time** left to do it. Stress levels increase, introducing a myriad of mental and physical complications.



- Lack of work equals lack of knowledge; **lack of knowledge** equals lower than possible examination marks.
- Marginal or **substandard work** – no one does their best work at the last minute.
- **Poor productivity.**
- High levels of **stress.**

By taking control of procrastination, not only will your marks improve:

- You'll **complete tasks faster**. The longer you put off your studies, the more information you forget, and therefore, the greater the time and effort required to complete a task.
- You'll create **more free time** to do the things you enjoy.
- You'll feel better about the quality of your work as well as your overall abilities.
- You'll feel **more confident** about forthcoming tests and exams.

OVERCOMING PROCRASTINATION

- Focus your attention away from negative thoughts and feelings and ask yourself the following questions:

“Why am I procrastinating?”

“What are the benefits and consequences of putting this task off until later?”

“What is most important to me?”

“What am I wanting to achieve”

“What’s my long-term goal of the task at hand? What’s my goal for this week, today and the next hour? Are these goals specific, realistic, and achievable?”

“What’s needed for me to achieve my goals?”

START
where you are.
USE
what you have.
DO
what you can.

Arthur Ashe

- Identify what will motivate you to start, keep going, and finish this task? Is it something intrinsic or extrinsic? Identify a motivator for each of your goals and keep that in mind as you approach each task!
- Be honest with yourself and work out what's realistic given your abilities and the time and resources available to you, and plan accordingly. This may require that you lower your standards or expectations, but "done is better than perfect".
- Think about what you want to achieve before you sit down to study. This will help prepare your unconscious mind for the tasks ahead, reducing the chances of procrastination.
- Telling yourself that you have to study for your exams can be overwhelming, especially when you're tired or beginning to feel anxious. Instead of saying you're going to study, set a task that has a clear end point. For example, you could read a chapter from a text book, complete half an exam paper, or work through 20 exam questions.
- Set **realistic and manageable goals** so that you know what you want to achieve and you can see clear evidence of your progress towards your goals.
- Find purpose in the tasks you need to complete. It is always easier to commit to tasks when they have meaning.

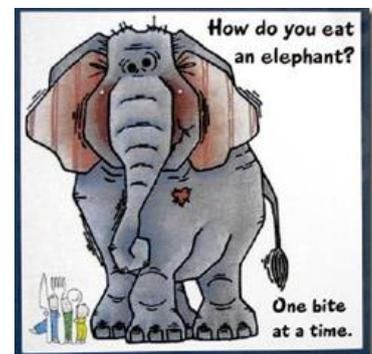
- Acknowledge unhelpful thoughts and feelings and focus on positive self-talk and action. Regularly tell yourself:

"I'm doing great!"

"This isn't easy but I'm getting there"

"I'm on the right track to achieving my goals".

- Tell yourself how great you'll feel once you've completed each task.



- One of the most important neurotransmitters (chemicals that transmit impulses from one nerve cell to another) involved in motivation and ability to complete tasks is called **dopamine**. Dopamine also plays a **key role** in concentration, learning speed, memory formation and regulating reward and pleasure.

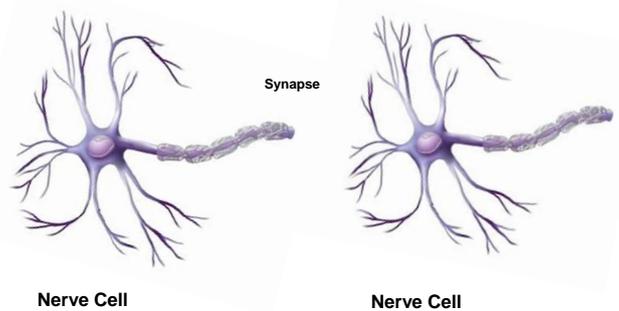
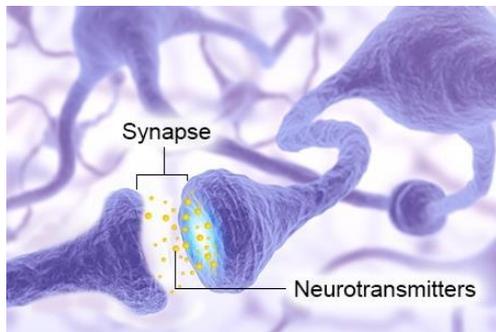
When we complete a task, no matter how small, dopamine is released, improving motivation and brain function! Therefore, divide large tasks into smaller more achievable milestones and/or start with the smallest or most pleasant task. Once you get into the swing of study, it won't seem as bad as you made it out to be, and it won't take as much effort to continue your study session. The beginning is always the hardest!

- If a task seems overwhelming, tell yourself that you're only going to do it for 10 minutes. There's nothing intimidating about 10 minutes, removing most of the struggles associated with starting. And more often than not, if you start off with a small or pleasant task, you'll end up doing more than 10 minutes after that initial hurdle of getting started is overcome.
- Ask yourself whether it's worth procrastinating if it means that it'll take you twice as long to complete the task another day.

THE ROLE OF NEUROTRANSMITTERS IN MEMORY & LEARNING

Our brain contains over 10 billion nerve cells (neurons) which control every bodily function from regulating the metabolism of all 30 trillion cells to enabling you to think, feel and behave as a human being.

Nerve cells (neurons) are aligned in a head to tail fashion as illustrated below:



Neurons do not actually touch each other but are separated by a space called the synapse (or synaptic cleft). When a nerve impulse arrives at the end of a neuron, neurotransmitters are released into the synaptic cleft.

These neurotransmitters are chemicals that transmit information from one nerve cell to another. They also play a vital role in concentration, memory and learning.

Studying/learning too long depletes the brain of the neurotransmitters required for efficient processing and memory storage.

Research shows that the average student cannot engage in intense study, and in particular, commit information to memory effectively on the same subject for more than 4 consecutive hours – even with 10 minute breaks every hour.

After 4 hours, efficiency and memory begin to suffer.

Implications For Learning Sessions:

- To derive the most from learning sessions (and cut down on study time), spread learning across a longer time frame rather than cramming before the examinations. You will learn more in ten 2 hour sessions than in two 10 hour sessions.
- Learn the hardest /newest materials first whilst neurotransmitters are at their peak levels.
- Change subjects or tasks every few hours and try not to study/commit information to memory for more than 4 hours at a time.
- When studying similar subjects for more than 4 hours at a time, change your learning technique every few hours.