

## **Learning Styles and Strategies**

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Learning is essentially a sensory experience. We learn new things through some combination of hearing, seeing or doing. *How* we choose to learn will largely depend on what we need to learn and our individual learning preferences. However, we are often unaware of how we learn best. Becoming aware of our individual learning preferences can allow us to seek out strategies that can make learning easier for us.

There are three basic learning preferences or styles: Auditory, Visual, and Tactile. Auditory learners learn best by hearing information. Visual learners learn best by seeing information, and tactile learners learn best by engaging in an activity. While we all exhibit auditory, visual and tactile characteristics, being aware of how we learn best is the first step to developing effective and efficient learning strategies. This is especially important in a field like medical education where the sheer volume of information can be overwhelming and the amount of time to navigate it is limited!

### **Informal Style Analysis**

While there are many tools available to assess learning styles and preferences, for general purposes, a formal analysis is not necessary. Completing an informal learning inventory can provide us with enough information to identify strategies that can be most effective in acquiring new knowledge.

Following are descriptions of the three basic learning styles. Look over the lists and choose the characteristics that best describe you. Please know that few (if any) people fall into one category alone, so you may very well check elements of all three styles. However, you will probably find a preference for one style over another. Knowing more about your preferred way of approaching new tasks and learning can help you choose learning situations and strategies to help you become a more effective and efficient learner.

## **Step 1: Informal Learning Assessment**

Following is a list of general descriptors for each of the three learning styles. Take a few minutes to look at the lists and check all of the items that describe you. Note that you will probably pick some for each category.

### **Learning Style Descriptors**

#### **Visual Learners:**

- Take a lot of notes
- Doodle on notes
- Picture phone numbers or words
- Can picture the “look” of a text book page when recalling information
- Have to write down directions
- Can listen better if looking at the person speaking
- Can clearly visualize people, places and documents
- Find it hard to concentrate with background noise
- Find it hard to remember jokes
- Must write down ideas or will forget them

#### **Auditory Learners:**

- Often “hear” the words when reading
- Find it helps to recite things over and over to memorize
- Find that discussing a concept with others increases understanding
- Like to finish one task before starting another
- Find it hard to make mental images of material
- Would rather listen to a tape than read the information
- Would rather give an oral as opposed to written report
- Talk aloud when problem-solving
- Prefer verbal to written directions.

#### **Tactile Learners:**

- Prefer doing things to reading or listening
- Often take notes but don't review them
- Study best with music playing
- Can be disorganized but know where things are
- Don't like to proof papers or tests
- Prefer projects and presentations to written reports
- Use hands and gestures a lot when talking

## **Step 2: Study Tips for Different Types of Learners**

### **A. Visual Learners:**

#### **For Independent Study**

1. Use charts, graphs and tables to organize material.
2. Use concept mapping/clustering techniques.
3. Look for techniques that focus on the “shape” of processes or procedures
4. Take detailed notes and compare with someone else.
4. Leave space on your notes so you can add ideas later.
5. Highlight important information as you read.
6. Write down anything that is important for you to remember
7. Work in a quiet space (although music may be helpful with mathematical computations.)
8. “Think on paper.” Write down the goals for each study session and steps to achieve them. (See *Personal Education Plan* for an example.)
9. Work alone.
10. Keep pencil and paper handy to write down ideas.

#### **For Lectures/Classroom Settings**

1. Use a tape recorder for important lectures where possible
2. Ask questions and contribute ideas. (This will help you stay alert during very auditory settings)

## **B. Auditory Learners**

### **For Independent Study:**

1. Write down your goals and the steps to accomplish them.
2. Use study groups as appropriate
3. When memorizing factual material recite it over and over.
4. Arrange your study time so you can complete one task before beginning another.  
This makes it easier to get a sense of accomplishment.

### **For Writing Papers:**

1. Read aloud when proofreading or when tired.
2. For rough drafts, try writing with a tape recorder

### **For Presentations:**

Visualize how you want it to go. PowerPoint can be a good tool to organize your presentation even if you don't actually use it for the presentation itself.

### **For Lectures:**

1. During presentations, sit at the back of the room to avoid distractions.
2. Utilize audiotapes where possible.

## C. Tactical Learners

1. Make study physical by doing things like:

- ✓ Standing up
- ✓ Pacing while memorizing
- ✓ Reading while riding an exercise bicycle
- ✓ Using a whiteboard for notes or calculations
- ✓ Squeezing a tennis ball

2. Use color to highlight books and notes in some organized fashion
3. Find a simple task that can be quickly completed to give a sense of accomplishment.
4. Keep a task list handy.
5. Break complex tasks down into simpler steps so that you can get a sense of accomplishment. It might be helpful to use some sort of data base or task list to keep track.
6. Keep a “distractions list” on your desk to write down other tasks or errands that need to be done as you think about them\*
7. Play music in the background
8. Read “whole-to-part”. First skim the material, look at any summaries and questions and then go back to read the whole thing.
9. Use mapping and clustering techniques.
10. Visualize complex projects from start to finish.
11. Read aloud when proofing or when tired
11. Keep a list of study strategies that work for you.

\* Regarding the distractions list: This technique can be particularly useful when engaged in an activity where it is easy to get side-tracked (like reviewing emails.) Keeping a list of things that are triggered by the task can allow you to attend to those things later and keep focused on the initial project.

Sources:

Center for Innovative Teaching Experiences, Wichita Public Schools (no date.)  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Division of Rehabilitation-Education Services.