

Mind-Wandering, Mindfulness, and Reading Comprehension



Struggling to Focus

Does your mind drift away while you're trying to focus on Reading Comprehension? It probably does, sometimes. Apparently, it's a condition cognitive psychologists call "[mind-wandering](#)" – an attention lapse often referred to as engaging in "task unrelated thoughts." Mind-wandering can be beneficial if your line of work benefits from inspiration and creative problem solving. Unfortunately, these are not among the most critical cognitive faculties measured by the LSAT. Mind-wandering can kill your score. Is there something you can do about it?

Perhaps. The science is still "iffy" on that subject, but preliminary studies suggest that by improving your "[working memory](#)," i.e. your ability to keep in mind multiple pieces of transitory information, you could improve your performance on reading comprehension tests. And while researchers seem to disagree about the extent to which we can enhance our working memory, a [new study](#) undertaken at the University of California at Santa Barbara and reported in the [NYTimes](#) suggests that something called "mindfulness training" can improve working memory and boost your GRE verbal score while reducing mind-wandering.

Mindfulness Training

What on earth is "mindfulness training"? Good question! (Trust me, if you're skeptical about New Age fads, you are not alone). Mindfulness, however, does make a lot of sense when it comes to stress reduction and enhanced focus. While it has roots in Buddhist teachings, mindfulness training is not spiritually based. Basically, it requires you to devote between 15 – 30 minutes per day involved in a variety of meditation exercises such as sitting in an upright posture with legs crossed and gaze lowered, breathing exercises, etc. In the Santa Barbara study, the students who engaged in such exercises for two straight weeks increased their average GRE verbal scores from 460 to 520. The control group experienced no such benefit.

For years, mindfulness-based stress reduction programs have been proven to provide powerful psychological benefits and have evolved into a common form of complementary medicine. Apparently, the same techniques can also boost your test scores. How much “mindfulness training” do you need? Nobody knows for sure. But the ability to concentrate while meditating can obviously be useful to standardized test-takers. Despite all the psycho-babble you might be tempted to tune out, the basic exercises are quite simple. Learn to sit alone in a quiet room, with your eyes closed, for 10-15 minutes. Focus on your breathing, and be aware of what you’re feeling in that very moment.

If anything, it will teach you how to live without your smartphone (if only for 15 minutes at a time).