GRADUPDATE

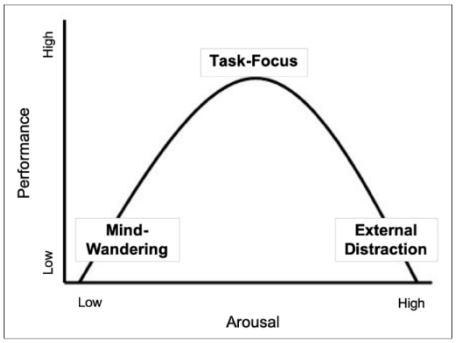
Hi graduate friends,

One question I occasionally get from students is “should I listen to music when I’m studying?”

When I first started researching the topic, I thought the answer would be easy, with clear best practices developed over the years. But research in this area seems to be inconclusive. One of the big reasons is that

it just depends on SO many different things it’s hard to evaluate it. For example, Hallam and MacDonald (2014) suggest that the type of music one listens to, a person’s recent life events, their emotional state or mood when they are listening to music, one’s characteristics/personality, the nature of the learning task they have at hand, and the listening environment can all play a role in what music does for one’s learning. A systematic literature review that looked into some research carried out from 2008 to 2018 studied the effects of background music on learning (de la Mora Velasco & Hirumi, 2020) and found no particular patterns that stood out. A study by Que et al. (2023) showed that daily background-music listeners’ brains got less overloaded by listening to music and reading at the same time compared to those who weren’t regular background music listeners. So, if we put all of that together, I’d say that if you don’t listen to music while you study, don’t feel the pressure to necessarily start now!

But if you do regularly listen to music, research shows that it’s highly possible that you already appropriately modify your habits based on your situation. A study on 197 participants showed that participants listened to music more often while driving or doing monotonous tasks and less often while studying and reading (Kiss & Linnell, 2023). Those who did listen to music while studying and reading mostly chose slow-tempo instrumental music (without lyrics) to help with focus, while they frequently opted in for fast-tempo music with lyrics while driving or doing monotonous tasks to feel energized. This is in line with what is called the “arousal” framework. This framework says that there is an inverted-U relationship between your attentional state (mind-wandering, task-focus, external distraction) and performance; meaning that if your brain’s arousal is too low your mind wanders, and if it's too high you get distracted, but if it’s in the middle area, you can better focus on the task at hand (Unsworth & Robison, 2016; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908). Image source: Kiss & Linnell (2021)



And this is possibly how a lot of students use music, to find that middle ground, and it makes sense that not everyone needs it. I’m sure future research will shed more light on this for us!

Best,

Aldean Ellis (he/him), from your Learning Development & Success team!

GRADUpdATE is a monthly e-newsletter dedicated to helping students succeed in graduate school. This information is provided by Learning Development and Success.

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Reference:

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