

# The Three-Step Strategy to Study Hard Without Burning Out

Most of the time I talk about learning better, I try to focus on long-term habits. Build good habits over months and years, and they'll serve you for the rest of your life. Even if you fall off the wagon, it's easier to rebuild old habits than construct fresh ones.

Sometimes, however, you won't have that luxury. You'll have a big test or deadline which you need to learn a lot, fast.

In this article, I'm going to share the strategy I used both when tackling the roughly four-fold pace of the [MIT Challenge](#) and currently, learning to [speak Chinese](#) over three months. What makes this strategy powerful is that it is the opposite of how most people approach tough learning deadlines, and why they eventually succumb to procrastination or burnout.

## **Burnout and Procrastination, Symptoms of a Poor Strategy**

The typical student's approach to a looming deadline is something like this: force yourself to spend all your time in the library, eliminate all social activities and fun, beat yourself up for wasting time or getting distracted.

It's a common pattern because it's a reinforcing cycle. You start getting distracted, so you force yourself to buckle down and spend more time studying. This drains you more, making it easier to get distracted, which guilts you into spending even more time in isolation. This generally continues until you're either operating at very low levels of your peak efficiency, or you're burned out and have given up.

What's hard for these students to realize is that they can learn more, by spending less time studying. (Or, more accurately, less time guilting themselves into studying since in the unfocused haze of semi-work, very little studying is actually occurring.)

## How to Study Hard Without Burning Out

The key of the method is simple: constrain your studying hours, but make them higher quality.

Here are the three steps, which I'll explain in detail:

1. Set concrete studying hours that leave room for rest time.
2. Switch passive learning tasks to active ones.
3. Build a comfortable, but distraction-free working environment.

### Step One: Concrete Studying Hours with Ample Rest Time

The first mistake is believing you can study non-stop. This is a dangerous temptation, and the bigger the exam or deadline looms, the easier it is to fall into this trap.

I'm not going to tell you that the optimal amount of hours of studying should be leisurely. If you want to study hard, you're going to have to work hard. But think of it like running a race, there's a hard pace you can stick to and a pace that goes too fast and you run out of air. Separating the two is a fine line.

The easiest way to separate that line is to set concrete hours that allow you enough time to rest. I personally find working 5 days per week 8am-6pm plus an additional half day (with breaks, of course), to be about the best I can do for more than several weeks at a time. I used this schedule throughout the MIT Challenge, and I'm using it now while learning Chinese.

Notice that this schedule means every evening is free as is one whole weekend day (and half of another). This means that going out to meet friends, exercising or anything else you do for fun doesn't need to be sacrificed.

If you're currently studying hard, feeling burned out, and are trying to switch strategies, your transition workload needs to be even less than this. I might do only half as much

for a few days or a week until I build back up to this schedule. If you're winded when running, you need to go back to a slower pace for awhile before you return to your sustainable pace.

## **Step Two: Switch Passive Learning Tasks to Active Ones**

I've used the running metaphor to explain why setting concrete hours is essential. However, the running analogy fails because mental and physical tasks are fundamentally different. If you're in a race and start feeling you're running too fast, you have to slow down. If you're in a mental race and start feeling you're pushing too much, your body can compensate by wrecking your focus.

When your focus is damaged, your learning speed is curtailed significantly, but you're still putting in a lot of effort. This means you may be putting in the same effort as someone who stuck with a concrete schedule, but you're learning far less.

The next step to combating this problem is to switch your tasks from passive to active ones. These will strain you more, so if you're transitioning from a burnout schedule to a fixed one, you'll need to set even more minimal hours for the first few days. However, the benefit of active tasks is that they force you in a higher efficiency direction with your studying.

Activeness is a spectrum so there aren't two categories of studying tasks that are labelled either passive or active. Rather, some tasks are higher-focus, higher-efficiency than others.

Self-testing is an active task. Re-reading notes is a passive one. The [Feynman Technique](#) is an active task. Skimming is a passive one. A good rule of thumb is that if there's no point in your studying routine where you have the possibility of finding out you're incorrect, it isn't an active task. I would make some limited exceptions to that list (some mnemonic techniques have no feedback, but are mentally demanding and fairly efficient) but it's a small one.

## **Step Three: Build a Comfortable, Yet Distraction-Free, Work Environment**

This step is obvious: if you work where you have distractions, you'll get distracted. I do my non-conversational studying of Chinese at a cafe where I don't have internet access. If you need to use the internet for part of your work, use an app like [SelfControl](#) to selectively block all websites that aren't work-related. If you can go without internet altogether, even better.

Put your phone on silent, or don't even bring it while you're studying. Go somewhere your friends aren't (although I picked my studying location in Chinese so that it can occasionally facilitate random Chinese conversations, it's the exception which proves the rule).

Even though you don't want to be distracted, don't worry about taking breaks. The ideal should be to create an environment where breaks are boring (but still relaxing) so you don't get tempted into giving up studying. Choosing break activities that fit that criteria in advance can help you sustain your focus over an entire day.

During the MIT Challenge, I'd often go for short walks or just sit quietly for fifteen or twenty minutes. These are good breaks because they allow you to give your mind a short breather, but they are boring enough that returning to your original task doesn't require willpower. Surfing the internet, chatting with friends or playing phone games aren't good break activities.

My frequency of breaks depends a lot on the type of activity I'm doing. I took frequent breaks during the MIT Challenge because the hard math problems and long reading assignments were difficult to sustain focus for more than an hour or so. During this language challenge I rarely take long breaks because the mental task of grammar exercises or vocabulary building is less taxing.

## **How to Transition from a Burnout Schedule to an Effective One**

Despite knowing these lessons deeply, I even recently succumbed to the temptation to

work too much. I built my language-learning routine around immersion, which meant nearly constant engagement with the language. That worked with Spanish, where studying time itself was rather minimal in comparison to simply interacting, but it broke down when applying it to Chinese.

My problem wasn't the No-English rule, but rather, trying to fill each day with too many activities that were mentally demanding. Always listening to [ChinesePod](#) instead of music, only watching Chinese television and media, studying every day instead of taking a day off each week. By the time I noticed I was about to hit a wall, I had a Chinese-language presentation looming in the following few days I couldn't get out of, and it burned me. I probably lost a few days of good studying time and possibly more in lowered efficiency due to my mistake.

But mistakes happen, and once I realized I had fallen into that trap, I redesigned a new studying schedule which followed the above rules and eased into it over a few days. Now I'm back on track and I'm getting at least as much studying done as I had been before, but I'm not exhausting myself to do it.

Sometimes you can fall into a burnout schedule but not recognize it for what it is. This can happen when you aren't making enough progress towards your goal (or are procrastinating so much) that you feel you should be working more, not less. In these cases, it can sometimes be hard to recognize that your inability to stay focused is a symptom of unconstrained work hours, not laziness.



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