

Using Learning Modalities

The four widely accepted learning modalities (or modes) are known by the acronym VARK: *Visual, Auditory, Reading/Writing, Kinesthetic*. They are sometimes inaccurately referred to as “learning styles” which implies that each learner has a “style” of learning that should be maximized in all learning situations. You may have taken a test that categorizes your learning style or been told you are a particular type of learner.

However, in reality we draw on all these modes as we study and learn. For example, most of us are able to better remember and understand material if it is presented visually, even though we may think of ourselves as more attuned to auditory learning. Although we might believe we will learn better using one mode over the others, an effective learner will be able to use many of them, depending on the situation.

Bottom line: don’t fall into stereotyping what type of learner you are. You are probably, like most people, a multimodal learner, meaning you may use any of these modes, depending on the situation. Instead of sticking to one, develop a repertoire that you can draw on to meet the many different learning challenges you are sure to encounter.

Visual Mode

We use the visual mode when we process information in the form of images that communicate major points, provide evidence or reasoning, and show relationships between ideas. Our brains process visual information very efficiently. It is much easier to recall a vivid image like a photograph than to remember what someone said or wrote. A written outline, handouts, or slides used in conjunction with lectures is a type of visual learning.

Visual strategies

- color coding notes, handouts, or textbooks
- rewriting notes to better organize them
- keeping course materials sorted in a file folder
- making illustrations, drawings, or concept maps as you study or plan projects or papers
- watching documentary films or instructional videos
- finding photos or other images related to what you are learning
- visual notetaking

Auditory Mode

The auditory mode consists of hearing and reciting information, asking frequent questions, and using discussion to clarify or absorb material. When you are in the auditory mode, you may be talking things out and reading more slowly so as to absorb everything.

Auditory strategies

- recording lectures or discussions and listening back to them later
- asking questions and discussing course content or ideas

- creating acrostic or mnemonic jingles to remember facts, lines, or other information
- dictating the first draft of a paper to a recording device (like a smart phone app)
- participating in a study group
- teaching or explaining what you are learning to a study partner or friend

Reading/Writing Mode

You may be in the reading/writing mode when you are interacting with texts. In this mode, you need to commit to undistracted time, so you might be better off working alone. You will probably be reading and then summarizing, analyzing, and responding to readings or class notes.

Reading/Writing strategies

- taking notes
- reading course content and re-writing it in your own words
- translating notes into different active study strategies, for example taking visual information from charts and graphs and describing them in writing
- reading over and summarizing handouts or information posted on class web pages
- writing out questions and answers as you read

Kinesthetic Mode

You are using the kinesthetic mode when you are doing something physical, best described as learning by doing—whether as hands-on activities or by experience—or by moving while thinking or studying. Some kinds of learning such as learning a physical skill require this modality, but you can also incorporate physical movement into your study routine even when what you are learning is primarily conceptual information.

Kinesthetic strategies

- experimenting with physical materials such as in a maker space
- watching physical demonstrations of processes or ideas
- role-playing
- acting out skits that dramatize course content
- using props to solve problems
- thinking up real-life examples to illustrate ideas or concepts
- imagining ways that course content has real-life applications
- taking short study breaks
- listening to recordings of course content or educational materials while you walk or work out
- moving while you study or lying down to study instead of sitting in a chair

To Sum It Up

How you approach learning depends on many different factors such as your background knowledge (if you already know something about the topic), your motivation, how the material is presented to you, and what you are expected to do with what you learn (memorize? solve a problem? write a response?). Learning often varies from person to person and from situation to situation. Approach each class, tutoring session, or study session with an open mind and develop

a repertoire of strategies using a variety of modes. That way, you can discover what works best for you in each situation, and when one approach is not working, you can try something else.