Breaking Tasks into Meaningful Chunks

Think of your brain as a giant file cabinet. As you take in new information, you want to be sure that it goes into the appropriate "file folder." (Otherwise it will get "lost in space.") In order to do this, you first need to think about the information. What do you already know about it? If you already have a "file" on this information, add the new information to it. If not, start a new "file" that is labeled appropriately so that you'll be able to find it later.

"Chunking" is a lot like filing. The idea is that you want to open only one "file" at a time, so that you can stay focused and "file" the information easily. This process will save time and it will also help you to understand better and to remember more effectively.

Some basic principles of "chunking" include:

- Break up study into 45 minute to 1 hour "chunks," focusing on one subject at a time. This is the maximum time most people can stay attentive.
- Break up reading or study by units of information (chapters/topics). This way, your attention will be focused on a topic for easier filing and retrieval.
- As you read, annotate text in order to better understand and label the information you are processing for future reference.
- After lectures and reading, add new information to maps or outlines so that it is "filed" appropriately.
- Write a summary after you complete each "chunk" of reading or at the end of your lecture notes, so that you can check your understanding and clarify what you have learned. This assists the way you "label" your information "files," and it will be easier to determine which "file" to open when you come across new information.
- Look for connections and relationships between ideas-- categories, similarities/differences, cause/effect, etc. Using visual organizers and asking questions at all cognitive levels will help you to do this.

By chunking your reading and other study tasks, you will find that new information will make more sense. This is because you will be connecting it to what you already know about the subject.   You will also be better able to make the connections you need to make with other information that will help you to thoroughly understand and learn.