Getting the Big Picture and Paying Attention to the Details

Based on information gained from new technologies and recent research on the brain, we know that we use the entire brain when processing information. In spite of this fact, learners seem to fall into one of two camps. Some tend to be **"right brained,"** showing a preference to learn and process information simultaneously and focusing on the big picture and relationships between ideas. Others tend to be **"left brained"** and learn and process information in a sequential, step-by-step fashion, while focusing on details. But just as we need to see with both of our eyes in order to capture all of the nuances of an image, we need to gather information from both "big picture" and "detail" perspectives in order to fully understand. Like a puzzle, **you don't get the "whole picture" until you have all the pieces.**

If you tend to be a "big picture" learner, you should be aware that you may miss important details when you read, take notes, and study. You may "jump to conclusions" in your eagerness to look for patterns and relationships. In a similar way, if you tend to focus on details, you may not recognize the relationships between ideas that are also critical to full understanding. If you "can't see the forest for the trees," you may find it difficult to understand where the information is heading.

The implication is that we should strive for a balance between these two styles of learning. We should seek ways to get information from the opposite "brain," by practicing ways to get all the information we need and/or by working with others who tend to be strong in the opposite style.

The following are some techniques that can help to strengthen both styles of learning:

If you are "Left Brained" (detailed, step-by-step, linear)

- To get the big picture, develop a map of each course and chapter of your text. This will help you to see where the details fit in and to determine which details are most important.
- Write summaries (in your own words) for each topic covered in your text and lectures.
- At the end of each chapter or unit, develop flash cards or Cornell notes to identify the most important information on one side and the details on the other side of the card.
- Use questions at all cognitive levels and visual organizers to help yourself process information more deeply and to see the relationships between important concepts.
- Use maps to help yourself identify the most important information for reviewing and for test preparation.
- Use maps to help yourself organize your thinking before you start writing.

If you are "Right Brained" (big picture, simultaneous, holistic):

- Annotate text and take lecture notes, focusing on important details by using Cornell notes. Number or bullet the details to draw your attention to them.
- For each lecture you attend or chapter you read, develop flash cards that identify the most important terms and concepts. Write main ideas on one side and details on the other.
- Use questions at all cognitive levels to quiz yourself and to be sure that you have considered the important details.
- Review flash cards or Cornell notes to prepare for tests and exams.
- Use maps to help with preliminary organization for writing essays. Be sure that you include sufficient details to back up your ideas. Use Cornell notes or other outlining techniques for organizing longer papers.
- Survey the whole test before you start answering questions. Develop a test-taking strategy to maximize your efforts. Be sure to read all questions thoroughly and to provide sufficient detail in your answers.