

1-1-2019

Curious Kids: is it OK to listen to music while studying?

Timothy P. Byron
University of Wollongong, tbyron@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Byron, Timothy P., "Curious Kids: is it OK to listen to music while studying?" (2019). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 4569.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/4569>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Curious Kids: is it OK to listen to music while studying?

Abstract

In a nutshell, music puts us in a better mood, which makes us better at studying - but it also distracts us, which makes us worse at studying. So if you want to study effectively with music, you want to reduce how distracting music can be, and increase the level to which the music keeps you in a good mood.

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Byron, T. (2019). Curious Kids: is it OK to listen to music while studying?. *The Conversation*, 17 October 1-5.

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Curious Kids: is it OK to listen to music while studying?

October 17, 2019 6.05am AEDT



Author



Timothy Byron

Lecturer in Psychology, University of Wollongong

Does music usually put you in a better mood? That might help you try a little bit harder and stick with challenging tasks. Shutterstock

I am in year 11 and I like to listen to music when I am studying, but my dad says that my brain is spending only half of its time studying and the other half is distracted by listening. He says it is better to leave my phone out of my room and concentrate on studying rather than listening to music. Is it OK to listen to songs when I am studying? – Robert, Year 11 student.

Curious Kids
A series for children.



It's a good question! In a nutshell, music puts us in a better mood, which makes us better at studying

– but it also distracts us, which makes us worse at studying.

So if you want to study effectively with music, you want to reduce how distracting music can be, and increase the level to which the music keeps you in a good mood.

Read more: Curious Kids: Why do adults think video games are bad?

Music can put us in a better mood

You may have heard of the Mozart effect – the idea that listening to Mozart makes you “smarter”. This is based on research that found listening to complex classical music like Mozart improved test scores, which the researcher argued was based on the music’s ability to stimulate parts of our minds that play a role in mathematical ability.

However, further research conclusively debunked the Mozart effect theory: it wasn’t really anything to do with maths, it was really just that music puts us in a better mood.

Research conducted in the 1990s found a “Blur Effect” – where kids who listened to the BritPop band Blur seemed to do better on tests. In fact, researchers found that the Blur effect was bigger than the Mozart effect, simply because kids enjoyed pop music like Blur more than classical music.

Being in a better mood likely means that we try that little bit harder and are willing to stick with challenging tasks.





When you study, you're using your 'working memory' – that means you are holding and manipulating several bits of information in your head at once. Shutterstock

Music can distract us

On the other hand, music can be a distraction – under certain circumstances.

When you study, you're using your "working memory" – that means you are holding and manipulating several bits of information in your head at once.

The research is fairly clear that when there's music in the background, and especially music with vocals, our working memory gets worse.

Likely as a result, reading comprehension decreases when people listen to music with lyrics. Music also appears to be more distracting for people who are introverts than for people who are extroverts, perhaps because introverts are more easily overstimulated.

Some clever work by an Australia-based researcher called Bill Thompson and his colleagues aimed to figure out the relative effect of these two competing factors - mood and distraction.

They had participants do a fairly demanding comprehension task, and listen to classical music that was either slow or fast, and which was either soft or loud.

They found the only time there was any real decrease in performance was when people were listening to music that was both fast and loud (that is, at about the speed of Shake It Off by Taylor Swift, at about the volume of a vacuum cleaner).

But while that caused a decrease in performance, it wasn't actually *that* big a decrease. And other similar research also failed to find large differences.





One study found a decrease in comprehension performance when people listened to music that was both fast and loud. But it wasn't that big a decrease. Shutterstock

So... can I listen to music while studying or not?

To sum up: research suggest it's probably fine to listen to music while you're studying - with some caveats.

It's better if:

- it puts you in a good mood
- it's not too fast or too loud
- it's less wordy (and hip-hop, where the words are rapped rather than sung, is likely to be even more distracting)
- you're not too introverted.

Happy listening and good luck in your exams!

Read more: Curious Kids: Why do old people hate new music?

Hello, curious kids! Have you got a question you'd like an expert to answer? Ask an adult to send your question to curiouskids@theconversation.edu.au



Music therapy Studying Curious Kids **You might also like**

Curious Kids: how can we see what we are imagining as well as what's in front of us?

Curious Kids: how can we see what we are imagining as

6 ways to establish a productive homework routine

Curious Kids: why is the sea salty?