

THE LEARNING CENTER • University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Digital Distractions

Do you frequently check your phone during class, work, or social settings? When you are attending class online from home, are you interrupted or distracted by notifications or the impulse to check for them? Do you stop studying every few minutes to text, check your social media, or watch a YouTube video? If this is you, know that you are not alone. While digital distractions are certainly not uncommon, they can be harmful to your study habits, breaking your concentration and rendering your reading or studying habits ineffective.

The good news is that there are techniques that can help you break negative technology habits and recenter your focus on your studies. This handout shares tips and tools to help you minimize distractions and stay on track when it matters most.

Tips to manage your technology

Remove distractions.

Anything that limits the interruptions or temptations caused by technology will help you stay focused on your studies and enter the deep concentration needed for effective learning. Try any of the following:

- Turn off technology during class and study time.
- Put your phone in your bookbag so you don't see it.
- Turn off notifications on your phone.
- Turn off unnecessary websites or apps that aren't necessary for the task at hand.
- Move tempting apps to the third or fourth page of your phone screen so that you have time to catch yourself mindlessly opening them.
- Leave your phone and computer in your dorm during class and study time.
- Put your phone in another room when you are working at home.
- Use noise-cancelling headphones or listen to white noise or instrumental music if you are studying in the same room as someone watching TV or viewing media on their computer

You can also try practicing metacognition, or "thinking about thinking." Observe the moods, thoughts, and other mental states (boredom, frustration, fatigue) that tempt you to pick up your phone or flick to your Twitter tab. With practice, you'll be able to recognize the times when you're prone to distraction.

Motivate and inspire yourself.

Remember your goals. Write a message or letter to your future self to remind yourself of your goals. Read this message when you find yourself being pulled into distractions. Put sticky notes and reminders to stay focused on your laptop, on the wall, and on your phone background.

Remember your reasons. Write down your WHY—why you want to do well in school and what you are working for. Your reason could be to make your family proud, to be the first one in your family to graduate from college, to get a high enough GPA to get into law school, or to do well enough to secure a good job after college. Post your WHY somewhere visible where you will see it frequently to remind yourself of what you are working for and why you need to focus. Check out these [videos](#) for further [inspiration](#) and explanation.

Convert your distractions into rewards. Some distractions are just idle habits. But if you're feeling distracted by something you really want to do, try promising yourself that you'll dedicate your time and attention to the distraction after you've finished the task you've set for yourself. For example, you could try a Pomodoro method, where 45 minutes of studying earns 10 minutes of something you enjoy. Promising yourself that you'll watch the next episode of your show after you've finished an assignment may help you focus your efforts in a way that watching the show before working on the assignment may not.

Use creative tools to stay focused.

Make staying focused a game. [Forest](#) is an app that allows you to build a tree on your phone whenever you want to focus. Once you start growing the tree, if you leave the app and go somewhere else on your phone, the tree dies. The app records how many trees you grow over the course of time. The Forest team partners with real life tree-planting organizations; when you spend coins you earn in Forest, they donate to tree planting.

Make a list. Use a list-making or to-do app, like [Toodledo](#), [Workflowy](#), [Remember The Milk](#), or [Evernote](#).

Track your progress. [Phocus App](#) includes timers, progress bar, pace-settings for work and break time.

Control what you see. When writing, use a full-screen mode, distraction-free writing program on your computer to reduce distractions. All you'll see are your words and nothing else. Consider downloading a writing program designed to provide a focused writing environment like these:

- [Focus Writer](#)
- [Omm Writer](#)
- [Write Monkey](#)
- Full-screen mode in [Pages](#)

Limit or block your internet use

You can put your device in airplane mode to disconnect entirely. There are also many programs and browser extensions that can help you limit internet access:

- **Leech Block**: “a Firefox add-on that lets you specify which sites to block and when to block them.”
- **Stay Focused**: A Google Chrome extension that “restricts...time you can spend on time-wasting websites. Once your allotted time has been used up, the sites you have blocked will be inaccessible for the rest of the day.”
- **Mac Freedom** “...locks you away from the internet on Mac or Windows computers for up to eight hours at a time...”
- **Self Control**: “an OS X application which blocks access to incoming and/or outgoing mail servers and websites for a predetermined period of time.”

Plan your time and set goals.

Time yourself. Set stopwatches and timers to keep you on schedule. Use a mindfulness bell. Or try the Pomodoro technique for a simple, structured way to build in breaks. Set a timer for 25 minutes, work completely focused during that time, and take a 5-minute break when the timer goes off. Rinse, repeat. It’s a great way to avoid burnout!

Schedule your check-ins. Designate times each day to check your email and other necessary websites. Turn off notifications and put your laptop and phone away when you can to eliminate checking these websites during times that you have not planned.

Organize your time. Use a calendar or planner to create a schedule for every day and record your to-do items. Include small breaks for movement and checking technology, but stay focused on work when it’s work time.

Have a purpose. Set times and goals for each event, study session, or to-do item on your calendar. Having specific goals and action items for each study time keeps you purposeful and on task. Check out some of these resources from the Learning Center to create goals and schedules:

- Weekly Action Plan
- Priorities List
- Goal Tracker

Chunk your study time. Keep your study or school work sessions fairly short (30-60 minutes). It’s important to take mental breaks, even if only for five or ten minutes, during a study block. If you have a long period of time to work, break it up into sessions with breaks in between. Using shorter study sessions can decrease your tendency to wander or turn to technology.

Anticipate your distractions. Before you start working, try to anticipate potential roadblocks. If you are studying at the library, when you run into a friend, how will you limit how much time you spend talking? If you are working from home, how will you stay on track when you have to pause to take the dog out? If you have loud or distracting roommates, what steps can you take to stay focused?

Seek accountability.

Keeping technology away during class and study time can be challenging, but you don't have to do it alone.

- Make an appointment with an [academic coach](#) at the Learning Center to discuss how technology affects your study time, implement strategies, and stick to them.
- Ask a classmate or friend to keep you accountable. Give your phone to this person or have them check in with you about how your studying is going.
- If you are working at home, ask someone you live with to help keep you on track by checking in with you every thirty minutes or every hour to see how things are going.
- Meet up with a friend in-person or virtually to get work done. Work independently, and check in occasionally with each other to share your progress.

Keep going

Using some of these strategies can help you minimize distractions and focus regularly. Not every single one of these strategies may work for you, and that's okay. Experiment with them and find a few that do work for you, then use them with fidelity. Remember that it's okay to slip back into your distracting technology habits every now and then—you are only human. However, keep yourself aware of when you are doing that and get yourself back on track as soon as you can.

Testimonials

Check out how other students are managing digital distractions!

Kicking Social Media Addiction: A UNC Sophomore chronicles efforts to rescue time from social media.

Blocking Distractions with Serene: Learn more about a UNC student's experience using Serene to block distracting websites for thirty-minute intervals.

Starting Cold Turkey, or Seeing the Trees through Forest: A UNC student describes using the apps Cold Turkey and Forest to increase productivity and focus.

Works consulted

Duhigg, Charles. (2010). *The power of habits: why we do what we do in life and business*. New York: Random House.

Newport, Cal. (2007). *How to become a straight-A student*. New York: Broadway Books.



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