Managing Technology Distractions

Source: The Learning Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

You might agree with T. S. Eliot's lament that "we are distracted from distraction by distraction": although social media and smartphones are important tools for learning and communication, they can keep you from devoting much attention to a single task. Some people think that they can multitask without impeding their work. Research(link is external) from Stanford University suggests that they're wrong. Yet more mounting(link is external) evidence(link is external) shows that the quality of each task suffers when you toggle between them and that a continually interrupted brain is more error-prone and less efficient than a focused one.

This page provides strategies to minimize and eliminate tech distractions so that you can be a better, more efficient learner.

1. Strategies to Minimize Tech Distractions

A good way to start managing technology is to try minimizing tech distractions instead of quitting them cold-turkey. Many people would find removing distractions altogether to be unrealistic and unworkable for a variety of good reasons. You can use the strategies below to minimize tech distractions.

- Practice metacognition(link is external), or "thinking about thinking": Try to observe the moods, thoughts, and other mental states (boredom, frustration, fatigue) that dispose 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.
- Clear your digital workspace: Close your email program and put your phone on airplane mode.
- Open only applications needed for your task: This will eliminate the temptation to switch to an unnecessary diversion, and will also create an uncluttered work space.
- Try full-screen mode: When writing, try full-screen mode(link is external) 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. The writing space and even their menus have a plain design—imagine a typewriter with a blank sheet of paper! Here are a few: Focus Writer(link is external), Omm Writer(link is external), and Write Monkey(link is external).

2. Strategies to Remove Tech Distractions

Do you think you'd benefit from removing tech distractions altogether? If so, then you might find these strategies useful:

- Cut the wireless cord: Leave your phone in another location, like in your room, if you're studying in the library. If that's not possible, silence it and tuck it out of sight.
- Make a plan: Schedule your tech time. Use one of the Learning Center's Planners(link is external)to set separate times for studying and for social media instead of letting them run together.
- Fight fire with fire: Try one of the following apps which temporarily limit or completely block access to either sites of your choosing or the entire internet.
  - Stay Focused(link is external): a free extension for Google Chrome (Mac OS X or PC) that lets you limit the amount of time you spend on time-suck sites. You specify sites you want to restrict and set the amount of time you'll allow yourself to use them. After that point, the extension blocks the sites. If you procrastinate by surfing Wikipedia, this would be a great option for you.

- Freedom(link is external): this program for Windows, Mac, and Android blocks the internet for an amount of time that you set.
- Self-Control(link is external): this free app for Mac OS X lets you block sites you set and even email for a set amount of time. If you need an hour (or five!) of totally uninterrupted time, SelfControl makes focus easy.

3. Strategies to Regulate Your Attention

Some strategies don't address technology specifically but instead address your attention itself. The following gives you the opportunity to train your brain into a focus machine, Spock style:

- Set goals: Set clear study goals and lay out a plan before you open your laptop. What will you study first? For how long? Then what? Detailed goal-setting and planning will help you begin your work instead of initially meandering through social media sites until you're "ready" to start.
- Time your work: Use timers, bells or apps that keep track of time. If you get "lost in time" on a particular assignment that ultimately limits your attention for other tasks, auditory cues may help. Timer and bells can remind you to move ahead to another task, or act as a "check-in" to see if you're on target. Scores of apps can help you:
  - Timers: Online stopwatch(link is external), ggtimer(link is external), Pomodoro Timer(link is external).
  - Mindfulness bells: here's one(link is external), and here's another(link is external).
- Harness helpful apps: Apps that aid in productivity and workflow can help you stay focused and on task. Examples:
  - 30/30(link is external): assigns times to the items on your to-do list to keep you on track. See our Compendium entry(link is external) for more.
- Make a wall of sound: Use sound generators like the following to block out distracting noise and create your own ambiance:
  - Noisli(link is external): offers a variety of sounds that you can layer to create your own productivity mix.
  - Coffitivity(link is external): plays café noises (they even include an option for a university café) to recreate a coffeeshop's busy ambiance.
- Streamline your surfing: Use RSS feeds(link is external) or news aggregators(link is external) instead of manually checking news sites for updates. Like above, schedule time to read the news.

Looking Forward

You didn't become over attached to your phone overnight, and breaking away from letting it disturb your work won't happen overnight, either. It's key not to expect huge changes to happen quickly. But with time and effort, you can reclaim your productivity.