Managing Your Attention – Eliminate Technology Distractions

Here are some strategies and suggestions to try to help manage attention when using technology.

Audit Your Time to See How Bad the Problem Is

If you're not sure where your time is going, the first thing you need to do is figure out whether your distractions are harmless diversions or real time-wasters. After all, it's possible that you're working so hard that you're not taking the breaks you need to recharge, and instead your attention is wandering so you can get a little relief from your work. Grab a notebook, and make a note to yourself whenever you catch your attention wandering, or after you've realized you're wasting time and you know you need to get back to work. If you can jot down how long you've been idle, that can help as well. At the end of a few days, you'll have a great idea of how often you're "out to lunch," so to speak, and whether it's really noteworthy. Plus, the action of keeping a log of what you're doing, even if it's just for your own personal review, will likely keep you a little more honest while you're working.

If you want to take it a step further, RescueTime, is a great application that will keep an eye on your activities for you so you don't have to. Just behave normally, breaks and distractions and all, and after a few days the app will show you exactly what you've been spending time on.

Get The Right Tools to Single-Task and Cut Off Your Distractions

Once you have an idea of how much time you spend distracted and how much time you spend working, you need to get the right tools for the job to control and manage those distractions. Remember, distractions that pull you out of the zone and keep you from focusing may not just be Facebook or your favorite blog—it could be your cell phone or gaming device. Whatever it is that's keeping you off your game, get the right tools to address it.

Distracting websites: There are a number of ways to go about limiting your visits to distracting websites, but I suggest you try Leechblock for Firefox and StayFocused for Chrome. Both extensions will help you set up your most common distractions and time-wasters, and then remind you to get back to work when you try to visit them.

Distracting applications: Depending on the tools you use every day for your schoolwork, you may want to do simple things like full-screening your apps so you don't see other windows behind the ones you're working in, or you may want to look into tools designed to minimize distractions, like one of these distraction-free writing tools. Often just making the app full-screen and eliminating any unnecessary menus is enough to keep your focus in the app, and away from surfing.
Choose a Productivity Technique that Bolsters Your Discipline

Even with the right tools in place, it can still be difficult to stay focused—you may catch yourself trading one distraction for another. Procrastination finds a way. Worst case, you spend more time on your productivity system than you do actually being productive. You may need to tweak that system—the best tools complement your productivity method, and the best method complements the way you work.

At the same time, don't forget to schedule your breaks and give yourself some time to be distracted and relaxed so you can recharge. One of the best ways to make sure you're productive and switched on when you need to be is when you know that a break is coming soon, or that you've scheduled some time to do something you like to look forward to. When your time is up, dive back in, knowing you've got another break coming up soon. Use your system—and your breaks—to shore up your discipline so you're less tempted to give in to distractions.

Resources:

- Ryerson University: http://studentlife.ryerson.ca/technology/midterms-get-your-distractions-to-work-for-you/
- Queens University website
- www.lifehacker.com