

Distractions

Let's be honest: we all struggle with distractions to some degree. Distractions can take many forms, including our phones, computers, friends, or our own thoughts. Many students struggle to stay focused and end up not getting the most of their homework and study sessions and thus sometimes need to cram at the last minute to get work finished. Fortunately, there are many strategies available to keep yourself distraction-free. This handout shares strategies to manage internal and external distractions so that you can maximize your focus (and your success) in school.

Managing internal distractions

Internal distractions are your own thoughts and emotions. This can include thoughts about pressing responsibilities or pleasant things that you'd rather be doing. This can also include emotions about life circumstances, the task you are working on, fears, and worries. Below are some tips to help you manage your internal distractions.

Make a daily plan.

- Schedule time for each task that you have to do. Plan to work in short chunks (no more than one hour at a time) and then take a break! Incorporating breaks will help you stay focused during your work time.
- Discover the best time of day for you to tackle challenging assignments. Doing the most challenging tasks first thing in the morning can help prevent getting caught up with distractions, but do what works best for you.
- Incorporate movement and fun. Make sure to schedule in times to participate in activities that you enjoy each day and week. Add some movement or exercise into your daily schedule. This could be anything from taking a fitness class at the gym to going on a run to dancing. Movement while studying can also help you stay focused. How about using a white board?

Manage your thoughts while studying.

- Plan an activity to transition your mind for focus, like deep breathing or listening to music.
- Write down competing and distracting thoughts on a post-it or notebook and save them for later. This way, you won't forget about them but you hopefully will be able to put them aside until you are done working.
- Consider building movement into your study time.

Get enough rest!

- Everyone is more distracted when tired. Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep each night.

Set SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, timely).

- Having specific goals can help you stay on task and feel motivated.

Engage in self-talk.

- If you find your mind wandering when you should be working, tell yourself to get back on task and that you need to complete this work.
- Praise yourself and verbally reinforce positive behaviors. Tell yourself that you did a great job when you accomplish a task.
- Remind yourself that you are capable and just need to put forth more effort if you start thinking you don't have what it takes to succeed.

Practice self-regulation.

- Self-regulation is when you use processes to be aware of and control your behaviors and thoughts. This will help you deal with distractions that can interfere with your learning. For example, move to another table when you are working in a group setting and distracted by someone talking near you.

Managing external distractions

External distractions are ones that originate outside of you—things like technology (phones, social media, websites, YouTube, video games, Netflix), other people, or noises around you. Below are some tips for managing external distractions.

Pick a setting that is a good match for the academic task.

Consider these questions before committing to a study location:

- What's better: a group setting or working alone?
- Do you work better with complete silence or a little background noise?

Consider the noise level you need to work productively:

- Do you need earplugs or head phones to cancel out surrounding noise?
- Try background sound. Play white noise on your computer, like rainymood or simplynoise. Run a fan or play quiet music.

Seek accountability

Ask a friend or classmate to keep you accountable to your goals and fight against distractions. Here are some ways a friend can help:

- Give your phone or laptop to a friend to hold onto when you are studying.
- Try studying with a friend or group to hold each other accountable to staying on task.

Take charge of technology distractions

Limit or bar yourself from unnecessary technology use during study and class times. This is another thing you can ask a friend to hold you accountable to!

- Leave your smartphone, laptop, etc. either at home or with a friend while studying.
- Use internet-blocking sites or self-management tools. [Click here to learn more.](#)

Connect with resources

Make an appointment with your guidance counselor to create a plan to decrease distractions in your life or to work on any other academic issue.

Check out our handouts on [Procrastination](#) and [Motivation](#) to gain more helpful tips about focus.

Works consulted

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