How to Focus on One Thing
(Source: http://www.wikihow.com/Focus-on-One-Thing)

Sometimes it seems like every time you sit down to work, another email alert dings on your phone, or another roommate barges in with some kind of ramen disaster. Busy people have to suffer lots of distractions, and learning to negotiate them can be a challenge. But it doesn't need to be. You can learn to prioritize tasks and find the things that demand your attention the most, then plan for knocking the most important things off your to-do list by minimizing distractions.

Part 1 of 3: Prioritizing Tasks

1. Write down everything you need to do. If you're feeling overwhelmed, stressed, and unfocused, making a list is the easiest and quickest way to simplify and help you plan an attack. To learn what you need to focus on now and how to put everything else in the background, make a list of the things that are pressing on your mind.

- Short-term tasks should be things that are urgent. What needs to be done today, or by the end of the week? You decide the time frame, but try to keep it as urgent as possible.

- Long term goals are also important, but only if you translate them into a list of specific short-term things that you can do. If "Become a doctor" is on your list of long-term goals, and is stressing you out, it's not something that you're going to be able to make happen before lunch. But you can start researching med schools.

2. Order the list. How you choose to assign importance to the tasks and prioritize them will depend on you and on your list, but there are several ways of going about it and making your job easier. Don't spend too much time tweaking the list, go with your gut instinct and get things in order so you can get started. One way is the A, B, C method, which breaks down tasks by:

- A: Must-do, very important tasks that must be done today. Example: Finish the report today by the 4:30 deadline.

- B: A task that may not be immediate, but will become an "A" priority eventually. Example: Get all tax documents together in order to file by next month.

- C: Tasks of least importance, although needs to be done. Example: Shred duplicate file.
• Organize according to importance. Identify the most important tasks on your list and put them at the top, ranking them according to how critical the task is to you. So, if you've got to write a term paper today, put away your laundry, and return a RedBox DVD, the tasks should probably be in that order.

• Organize according to difficulty. For some people, putting the most difficult tasks up front and getting them out of the way is the best way to approach a to-do list, while others prefer to start small and progressively get bigger. It might be easier to focus more on reading a chapter for your history class if you get your math homework out of the way first.

3. **Estimate how much time you’ll need to accomplish each task.** Next to each item, it can be helpful to draw up a brief estimate of how much time it'll take you to actually complete it. Again, don't spend a lot of time calculating, or stressing over this detail. You don't even need an actual number, just break each item into a category called "Quick" or "Slow" so you'll know when to assign each task.

• If you know you won't be able to complete all your history research in the ten minutes you have to get something started, you can put it in the back of your mind and do something else instead with your time. Start the laundry, or write up a thank-you note to someone you've been meaning to get in touch with. That's using your time wisely.

4. **Pick the first thing you need to do.** After giving some consideration to time and the importance of the tasks, you'll have to put something at the top of the list. Decide what it is that demands your attention right now at this instant and put it there. It might be the most important thing on the list, or the most timely, but whatever it is, it's something that you're going to do and work on until it's finished, or finished-enough for your purposes.

5. **Put the list away.** Be confident and secure in knowing that you've made a to-do list and you can put it away and ignore it for a while. Once you know what task you're going to complete right now, having the list looming over you will just be distracting and will keep you scattered. Put the list away, in a drawer, or somewhere else you won't be able to see it. Nothing else matters right now but the thing on the top of your list.

• Desktop stickies are great little reminder tools for a lot of people on their laptops, but consider hiding them when you've really got to focus on something. Don't be stressing about the party you've got to get organized for later if you're writing a term paper. Put the list out of your mind by putting it out of sight.
6. **Make a "To-Don't" List.** Make a list of things that will not happen right now. Although counter-intuitive, removing tasks from your mental list helps you free yourself to do the things that you really need to do. For example:

- You will have to work late. Therefore, you cannot make dinner tonight.
- Your cross country meet conflicts with the yearbook meeting. You can't do both.

**Part 2 of 3: Eliminating Distractions**

1. **Find a quiet place to work.** Working somewhere you won't be distracted by TV, side-conversations, and other chatter is absolutely essential to learning how to focus. Sometimes, it's tempting to think that sitting in the living room with your roommates or your family is a better and less stressful way to work, but it'll end up taking twice as long and the work will be half as good. If you've got to do something that demands your attention, head to a quiet corner in your room, or head out to the library.

- If you can't work somewhere quiet, consider investing in sound reduction headphones that'll help to cut out the chatter and center you into what you're doing, whatever it is. If you don't want fancy headphones, check out white noise generators on line, letting ambient music or background static overwhelm the distracting conversations happening around you.

2. **Turn off your phone and put it away.** It's not just calls and texts anymore, now you've got to worry about social networking updates, emails coming through, and Words with Friends challenges popping up on your phone every five seconds. There's nothing more distracting than a cellphone. Turn it off and put it away when you need to focus.

- Putting your phone on silent still makes it easy to check. It's better to physically put it somewhere it will be difficult to access. If you're working in your room, charge your phone in another room.

- If your phone proves very distracting, consider eliminating certain time-suck apps from your phone. You don't actually need Facebook and Twitter on there.

3. **Set a specific amount of time to work on one thing.** When you're about to get started, look at the clock. How much time do you have to work? How much time will you need to complete the project? How much time can you afford to give it today? Decide how long you're going to work on the task at hand and get cracking.
• Schedule periodic breaks. It's common to work 50 minutes on, and then take 10 minutes off to get up, walk around, get a drink, and do something else for a while. It'll be less tempting to look at a funny YouTube video right now if you know you'll be able to in another 20 minutes, anyway and not feel guilty about it.

4. **Make it impossible to waste time online.** Most people work on computers, which is a shaky proposition for a lot of people. Your term paper is right next door to Facebook, wikipedia, and Buzzfeed, meaning that no matter how deep you are into some good work, writing, research, or whatever demands your digital attention, a good YouTube downward spiral is never more than a click away. Learn to recognize your time-wasting habits and head them off at the pass.

• The easiest way to make it difficult to screw around online is to turn the Internet off. Shut off your WiFi connection so you won't be able to log on and mess around.

• StayFocused, Anti-Social, LeechBlock, and Cold Turkey are all blockers that you can install if you must use the Internet to complete your work. These will block specific websites, or your whole connection for certain periods of time that you can customize. If you struggle with this, it can be a good idea.[1]

5. **Optimize your social media and e-mail filters.** Sometimes, you have the best intentions and still social media sucks you in. We say to ourselves, "I've got five minutes, I'm just going to look at Facebook quickly," and an hour later you're elbow-deep in your roommate's high school frenemy's vacation pictures from six years ago. How does this happen?[2]

• Mute or unsubscribe from all your friends on social media who don't enrich your experience. If you end up getting distracted because of your childhood friend's anti-government screeds on Facebook, don't waste time reading them. Block them, or better yet, unfriend all your imaginary social networking friends. Focus on more important things.

• Set up your email so it won't alert you every time something new comes in, and organize work emails and personal emails into separate folders or separate accounts to help keep everything straight. You won't have to worry about getting sucked into a catch-up email from grandma while you're working if you don't see it until later. Emails shouldn't demand your immediate attention.
6. **Pinpoint your emotional distractions.** Not all distractions are YouTube-related. Sometimes, you're focused entirely on reading that novel for English class and all of a sudden your ex pops into your head. Game over. If you find yourself distracted by feelings of anxiety, or common emotional ruts, learn to recognize your habits and better head them off at the pass.[3]

- If you find yourself distracted by a wandering mind, don't try to tell yourself to stop, give yourself a break. **Saying, "Don't think about pink elephants" will always put a pachyderm in your mind. Let yourself think about it for a minute, let yourself be distracted, and get it out of your system. Then put it away.**

**Part 3 of 3: Getting Through the List**

1. **Perform some kind of meditation every day.** Taking a few minutes out of your day to sit quietly and contemplatively can lower stress levels, help to center yourself, and quiet loud thoughts that can serve to distract you later while you're supposed to be working. If you struggle with a wandering mind, practice meditation a few times to get the hang of it, then develop a practice that works for you.

   - Meditation doesn’t need to involve corny chanting and incense. It's the opposite of complicated. Make a cup of coffee or tea and drink it on your porch and watch the sunrise every morning. Go for a quiet walk in the park and sit on a bench. Just sit. Don't use this time to think about everything you need to do. Use this time to just sit.

2. **Work in the same place every day.** For some people, developing a routine helps to channel productivity. If you always go to the same coffee shop, or always sit at the same place on the couch to do your work, you'll be more productive, more able to focus, and will be less distracted by the new environment you're experiencing every time you have to do something. Pick a place and make it your place.

   - Alternatively, if staying cooped up in the same old office keeps you feeling restless, go elsewhere. Find a different coffee shop every day and let the white noise of the side conversations and the new pastries invigorate you. Variety helps some people focus more.

3. **Wait until you feel friction happen, then go for a walk.** David Carr, a New York Times columnist, likes to keep writing and pushing through until he feels himself starting to slow down, until the work starts to bog down his focus. At this point, continuing to work would become unproductive.[4]
• Instead of banging your head against the wall, put your project away for a minute. Go outside. Walk the dog. Take an aimless trip around the neighborhood for 10 minutes. Grab a coffee and think on the problem you’re encountering, but without the ability to fiddle with it. When your break’s over, head back refreshed.

4. **Give your breaks a physical component.** No one can or should sit at a computer for 10 hours straight. When you've gotten the chance to take a break, it's important to use that break to do something physical. Move around. Get up and go for a walk, even if you've got nowhere to go.

• It might seem corny, but keeping some light hand weights in your office to use periodically while you're reading can help you remember what you're reading more. Studies show that light exercise aids memory retention.[5]

• Have a snack. Low blood sugar keeps the mind from firing on all cylinders, meaning that a handful of nuts or a piece of fruit during the afternoon dip in energy will help you get back on track and focus.

5. **Celebrate each accomplishment.** When you get something done from your list, celebrate that thing for a minute. Even if all you give yourself is a pat on the back and the chance to cross it off the list definitively, take a minute before you do something else to relax. You earned it.

• Use small celebrations for every day things. When you finish your project for the work day, cross it off the list and pour a glass of wine. Or tear up the list entirely and burn the scraps. You're done!

• Let yourself go big for big accomplishments. Head out to a nice restaurant when you finally get all your applications in for graduate schools, or treat yourself to something at the end of a long-term difficult project.

**Tips**

• You might be amazed to discover, that when you work with clear mind and focus only on one thing at a time, you actually do it better faster and it comes more easily to you. And this is the secret on how to stay on task.
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Sources and Citations

2. ↑ http://tech.co/7-ways-avoid-distraction-increase-productivity-2013-09
4. ↑ http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/17/some-advice-from-authors-to-avoid-online-distractions/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0